

The Dragon and the Bow

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Summary: Political marriages are nothing new. Times are hard even in the harsh Northlands, with dragons and marauders in abundance and allies few and far between. But when Hiccup and Merida are forced together to forge an alliance between Berk and the Highlands, will the result be heartbreak or will unexpected feelings defeat an ancient evil that threatens to turn the world to ash?

1. History Lesson

****The Dragon and the Bow****

****Prologue: History Lesson****

Somewhere upon the open ocean,

Waves crested and crashed together as the wind howled over the vast blue expanses of the Northern Sea. Cutting through the icy waters was a small fleet of longships, their hard wooden frames impervious to the lapping salt water. Wind pushed against their massive sails while dozens of oars rowed rhythmically through the sea.

Within the belly of one of the larger longships, a young boy sat, curled up in a corner, wrapped in a brown, fur-lined blanket. He had short, dark red hair and icy blue eyes, which were closed as he tried to ease his turbulent stomach, holding his knees to his chest.

He did not move as the sound of someone approaching him reached his ears. The person was large and heavy, their footsteps booming against the wooden planks that groaned while trying to support the person's weight. As the person neared, the boy could hear the sound of wood knocking against wood every other step.

"Havnae got yer sea legs yet, eh laddie?" a masculine voice asked with a hearty laugh.

The boy simply shook his head in reply.

"Aye, Ah remember ma first time on a ship" the man laughed again as he sat down next to the boy, the wood straining under his weight, "Turned sae green ma farther thought Ah had turned intae an ogre!"

The boy chuckled in reply.

"What did you do, Granda?" the boy asked meekly.

"Well, Ah went doon intae th' hold, much like ye, an' then curled intae a ball, much like ye," the man continued, another chuckle escaping his lips, "An' then ma granda stumbled upon me, an' he told me a story tae distract me from th' rockin' o' th' ship."

"Can you tell me a story, Granda?" the boy requested.

"Whit dae ye think Ah came doon here for?" the man asked, "Whit kind o' story wud ye like tae hear?"

The boy merely shrugged.

"Well, Ah've got a story 'at Ah'd like tae tell ye," the man stated with another laugh, "It's a story o' grand adventure an' heroic bravery, unintended romance an' unexpected friendship, a tale about peace an' war."

The boy slowly turned his head to peack an eye at the older man.

"Aye, Ah thought 'at'd grab yer attention," the man surmised with a chuckle, "Sae, wud ya like tae hear it?"

The boy nodded in reply.

"'At's whit Ah like tae hear," the man grinned, "First though, in order tae tell ye this story, Ah hae tae give ye a wee history lesson."

The boy lifted his head up completely, his full attention on the older man.

"Ye see, way back when th' Old Empire fell, th' world plunged intae chaos," the man explained, dropping his voice low and waving his hands about for emphasis, "Kingdoms rose an' feel like waves on th' sea, dozens o' kings and chiefs whose names are lost tae history. It was durin' this time, in th' wintry wastes o' th' Norselands, 'at a man rose tae prominence an' united th' warin' tribes o' Vikin's intae a single kingdom. They gave him th' title o' jarl an' he ruled th' warrior folk with honor, as did his son, an' his son after 'at."

"They ruled fer generations an' th' Norsemen knew peace," the man explained his voice dropping as he leaned closer to the boy, "Until th' dragons came."

"Great beasts o' every size an' shape, leavin' death an' devastation in their wake," the man explained, "Ne'er afore had dragons been seen

in such great numbers an' with such great fury. Th' Vikin's were unprepared fer such an attack, only havin' dealt with lone dragons afore. Th' Vikin's had nae idea why they were bein' beset by such a ferocious assault. Until th' Red Death came."

"The Red Death?" the boy asked, his eyes wide with wonder, "What's that?"

"Th' most fearsome dragon 'at ever lived," the man replied ominously, "As big as a mountain an' as tough as ane too, its rocky scales impervious tae even th' sharpest swords an' th' heaviest hammers. Its wingspan massive enough 'at it cud turn day intae night an' kick up windstorms with a single flutter! Its mouth was as cavernous as a mineshaft an' contained row upon row o' massive, razor sharp teeth! It had four legs thick as tree trunks, ended in claws 'at cud slice a man in twain, armor an' all, an' a massive tail 'at ended in a spiked club 'at cud crush buildin's tae dust!"

The boy gasped, his eyes widening in fear.

"An' then there was its breath, a fiery. amber maelstrom o' death 'at cud turn a man tae cinders in an' instant!" the man continued, throwing his hands into the air dramatically, "This great beast drove th' other dragons afore it like cattle, set on destroyin' th' Vikin's in a stampede o' blood an' brimstone."

"Why?" the boy asked.

"Eh?" the man questioned.

"Why did the Red Death want to destroy the Vikings?" the boy asked, looking up at the man for answers.

"Nae ane was ever sure why th' Red Death attacked," the man explained, "Some believe 'at th' dragon jist had an appetite fer destruction, an' it needed tae be slated. Some believe 'at afore th' first jarl came along, th' Vikin's sacrificed tae th' Red Death like it was a god, an' 'at it was angry at th' jarl fer endin' th' practice. Some believe 'at th' first jarl had stolen some great treasure from th' Red Death, like gold or jewels. Others believed 'at it was a woman 'at th' jarl had taken from th' dragon, specifically its wife."

"It's wife?" the boy asked, "Like a girl dragon?"

"Nae, like a woman," the man replied, "It's said th' Red Death took a woman as its wife after she was brought tae th' dragon as a sacrifice but convinced it tae let her live instead."

"Do you think the jarl took the Red Death's wife, Granda?" the boy asked.

"Ah daenae rightly know," the man replied with a shrug, "Whit is important is 'at th' Red Death an' its horde o' dragons scorched th' Norselands until they reached th' capital city where th' current jarl lived. They say 'at there was a great battle, but in th' end, th' jarl was killed, his kingdom burnt tae ashes an' th' Vikin's scattered tae th' four winds."

"What happened to the Vikings?" the boy asked.

"They reformed their auld tribes, an' took tae warrin' wi' each other again, as well as fightin' with neighborin' kingdoms. Most importantly, nae too long ago, there was a war between th' Vikin' tribe o' Berk an' th' Highland clans," the man explained, his eyes dimming in memory, "It was a bloody affair, an' there was much lost on both sides, but in th' end, th' Vikin's were defeated an' retreated tae their island home while th' four Highland clans united under th' single banner o' Clan Dunbroch. There wasnae tae be any peace though."

"What happened, Granda?" the boy asked.

"There came a new enemy, ane 'at clashed wi' every kingdom upon th' Northern Sea. They were called th' Vandal, an' between them an' th' swarms o' dragons hauntin' th' skies, th' Northlands knew no peace."

"Who are the Vandal?" the boy asked.

"Whit are they would be more appropriate, Ah think," the man replied, "More beast 'en men they were, livin' in caves an' fightin' like mad animals. Some even claimed they ate those they killed. Worst o' aw though was their leader."

"Who was their leader?" the boy questioned.

"A monster o' a man," the man replied solemnly, his eyes clouded with thought, "They called him Mor'du, th' Demon Bear."

"What did he look like?" the boy asked, though he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Ah'll tell ye, because Ah saw him," the man said, looking at the boy intensely, "An' it was saemethin' Ah will nae soon ferget."

As his grandfather began the tale, the boy closed his eyes again, feeling himself being pulled into the story. No longer did he feel the rocking of the boat or hear the creaking of the wood. He had been pulled away from that. Instead he heard the whistling of a winter wind across the Highland hills and felt the cold blast of late winter snow on his face.

High upon a cliffside, overlooking a lake, was a large castle, its walls and towers made out of brown stone blocks. People came and went among the walls and the keep, traveling across the stone bridge that gapped the moat surrounding the structure. A light snow fell upon the castle, caking it and the surrounding forest in white while the lake was cast in a dark blue.

Moving about the bustling people as naturally as a fish through water, was a girl no older than fifteen. She had a wild mane of bright, curly red hair that if straight would have most likely touched the ground, but instead stuck out in every direction. She had a slim build, fair skin dotted with freckles and icy blue eyes. She wore a dark blue dress with white trim along with a black cloak and leather riding boots. A quiver filled with white fletched arrows was strapped to her hip by a leather belt while a wooden recurve bow was slung around her shoulder.

She moved through the crowd before entering the castle through a pair of wooden doors. She paused to shiver off the cold as she shook the snow from her hair and stomped the mud from her boots before making her way through the stone hallways, her way lit by torches set in scones along the walls.

Eventually, she came to another set of large doors from which the sound of muffled voices could be heard through. Entering, she found herself in a large two-storied meeting chamber. At the center of the room was a large wooden table, on which dozen of plates filled with delicious looking food sat. Above, a wooden chandelier hung from the stone ceiling while two sets of wooden stairs flanked the entrance she came in through. Against the opposite wall were six stone thrones of various sizes which sat facing the door.

At the table, five people had gathered. At the head of the table, facing the door, was a large middle-aged man. He had wild red hair like the girl's, though his had begun to grey with age and was held in check by the iron cap he wore. He also sported a trimmed goatee and a massive mustache that stuck out perpendicular to his nose. He had icy blue eyes that peeked out from underneath his massive eyebrows. He wore brown leather and grey chainmail armor over his large frame, over which he wore a green and grey tartan held up by a large brown leather belt. He wore brown leather bracers and a black bearskin cape hung around his shoulder. His right foot was covered in a brown leather, fur-trimmed boot while his left was replaced with a knotted wooden peg leg.

Next to him sat a woman about the same age as him, looking over some letters. She had very long brown grey-streaked hair that almost touched the ground, tied back in two braids, and woven with golden colored thread that kept it out of her brown eyes. She wore a green and black colored dress with gold trim and billowing sleeves over her fair, slim frame along with cloth slippers on her feet. Around her waist hung a belt of interlocking gold circles and on her head sat a golden tiara imbedded with an emerald.

Next to her sat three young boys, each identical to the others. They had fair skin with rosy cheeks, curly red hair and bright blue eyes. They wore the same green and grey tartan robes held up by large brown leather belts. They also had identical brown leather shoes on their feet.

As the girl entered, she saw that the man was in the middle of telling a story, which none of the others seemed particularly interested in.

"He stood twelve feet tall, a claymore in ane hand an' a war axe in th' other," the man said as the girl snuck in, apparently unseen by all, "He wears th' hide o' a massive black bear as a trophy, its hide littered with th' weapons o' fallen warriors."

"His bodied is marred by thousands o' battles," the man continued, not noticing one of the boys had fallen asleep, another was picking at his food in boredom and the third was perfectly lip-synching with the man's tale, "His face scarred with ane deid eye! Ah drew ma sword and-!"

"Slash!" the girl shouted, jumping in between the boys and startling them, "Da's leg was clean off!"

"Aw," the man groaned, looking disappointed, "'At's ma favorite part, Merida."

"Sorry, Da," she giggled as she sat down at the empty seat at the table, "But we've heard th' story o' Mor'du an' his Vandal hordes invadin' a thousand times before."

"Well, 'at's because it's ma favorite story," her father explained, "And ane day, Ah'll pay 'at savage back fer whit he did tae me with interest, isnae 'at right, Elinor?"

"O' course ye will, Fergus," the woman replied, not looking up from her letters.

Merida giggled again as she slung her bow off from her shoulder and placed it on the table while reaching for a plate to serve herself dinner.

"A lady daes nae place weapons on th' table," Elinor chided, still not looking up from her letters.

"Ma!" Merida groaned, rolling her eyes as she dejectedly took her bow off the table and leaned it against her chair.

"In ma opinion, a lady shud nae hae weapons at all," Elinor continued, glancing at Merida as she glared at her.

"Let her hae her fun," Fergus replied with a chuckle, "She's just a lass after all."

"She wonae be a lass ferever though," Elinor replied as she picked up another letter and opened it. She looked at it in confusion for a few moments before her eyes widened in surprise and she began to read it intently, holding the parchment with two hands.

"Fergus," she said harshly, catching her husband's attention just as he was about to bite into a leg of lamb, "look at this!"

Fergus took the letter and quickly read it over, a look of surprise on his face.

"He agreed tae th' terms?" Fergus asked.

"This was his idea," Elinor replied.

"Still, Ah didnae think he'd accept all th' terms," Fergus stated.

"These are tryin' times," Elinor said, "He's got few friends an' many enemies. Ah'm sure he'd like tae reverse 'at."

"He doesnae hae any friends," Fergus stated matter-of-factly.

"Exactly," Elinor replied.

"Ah'm still nae sure aboot this," Fergus stated, glancing over at Merida who was busily devouring a sweet roll, "Ye know she's nae gaein' tae like this."

"Trust me, Ah know," Elinor sighed, "But there comes a time in everyane's life where they hae tae accept their fate. Especially when th' fate o' two peoples hangs in th' balance."

"Alright," Fergus sighed in defeat as he nodded his head, "Shud we tell her now?"

"Tell me whit?" Merida asked, looking up from her dinner in confusion.

"Looks like 'at answers th' question," Fergus mumbled, "Boys, why dinnae ye wait outside while we talk tae yer sister."

"Actually," Elinor interjected, "Ah think it will be better fer them tae hear it now instead o' later."

"Alright," Fergus said solemnly as the four siblings looked at each other in confusion.

"We hae just received a letter from Stoick th' Vast," Fergus began, holding up the letter in questioned.

"Dae ye know who 'at is, Merida?" Elinor asked.

"He's th' chieftain o' th' Berk Vikin's," Merida replied, confused, "Th' anes 'at invaded when Ah was a wee lass. Whit daes he want?"

"He wants peace between our peoples," Fergus explained, "an' an alliance."

"An alliance?" Merida questioned, her heart dropping as she realized where this was headed.

"Yes," Elinor replied, "An alliance 'at must be sealed with a marriage."

"M-Marriage?" Merida mumbled in shock as her brothers looked at their parents in surprise.

"Stoick has a son yer age," Elinor continued, "From whit Ah understand, he's a very nice boy."

"Ah dinnae care if he's a nice boy!" Merida shouted, suddenly exploding with anger, rising from her chair and knocking it to the ground "Ah'm nae gaein' tae be someâ€|someâ€|Vikin's whore!"

"Merida!" Elinor admonished, rising as well.

"I wonae dae it! Ye cannae make me!" Merida shriek, glaring at her mother.

"Merida, be reasonable," Fergus pleaded.

"Reasonable!?" Merida exclaimed, "Ye want me tae be reasonable!? Reasonable isnae marryin' yer only daughter off tae a complete stranger, tae th' son o' ane o' yer worst enemies! Ah'm nae some game piece ye can use as ye wish! Ah'm nae givin' up ma freedom fer some

deal ye struck with some savage!"

"Dae ye understand whit's at stake here!?" Elinor exclaimed, her fury rising, "Dae ye know th' price yer freedom will cost!? Ye will dae this an' 'at's final!"

Merida tried desperately to find something to say, something biting to counter her mother's argument. Instead all she found was sorrow as she burst into tears. Sobbing, she turned and ran from the room, slamming the doors behind her.

"We cudae handled 'at better," Fergus commented, slouching in his seat.

"Ah know," Elinor sighed, sitting back in her chair as well, "She's just soâ€|stubborn."

"Sounds like someane else Ah know," Fergus commented, earning a glare from his wife.

"Ah'm nae 'at stubborn," Elinor shot back. Fergus chose not to comment, instead focusing his attention on the three frightened boys staring at them.

"Is Meridaâ€|really gaein' away?" one of them asked.

"Ah'm afraid sae, Hamish," Elinor said, reaching down and pulling the young boy into her lap, "She's gaein' tae gae live with th' Vikin's."

"Why?" another asked, crawling into her lap as well.

"Well Harris, it's sae 'at both our people an' theirs can see 'at we are united as friends," Elinor explained.

"Whit if we daenae like him?" the third questioned, hanging onto the chair's armrest.

"Well then Hubert, Ah suppose ye will hae tae deal with him," Elinor replied, a small smile tugging at her lips.

"Whit if they daenae like her?" Hamish asked.

"Then they will hae tae answer tae me," Elinor replied simply, a full smile on her face.

Meanwhile, up in her room, Merida lay facedown in her bed, sobbing into her pillow and cursing her fate along with every Viking who had ever lived.

A/N: So after giving it the barest of hints at the end of Heaven's Light seemed like a lot of people wanted me to write a Brave/How to Train Your Dragon crossover. So here it is! I hope you guys enjoy it, as you may have been able to tell, I'm going with a bit of a different take on some elements of the stories, tell me what you think! Please review!

****Chapter 2: Betrothed****

The cold Northern Sea churned as four longships made their way across the blue expanse of the water, the winds filling their sails and their oars cutting through the ocean foam. Each of the ships flew a flag depicting a downward pointing sword in front of four interlocking circles upon a field of green.

Merida leaned against the railing on the deck of one of the boats, glaring out at the sea as the wind fluttered her red hair, making it look like she was ablaze with anger.

Standing behind her were three young men around her age. One was tall and athletic, with fair skin and a skinny yet muscular physique. He had long wavy brown hair which hung partially over the left side of his face, obscuring one of his blue eyes as well as his large ears and part of his prominent nose. He wore a red and green tartan robe, partially revealing his bare chest underneath, along with a pair of tall brown leather boots and leather bracers on his wrists. He wore a claymore strapped to his back and a leather belt around his waist. Blue war paint swirled down his right arm from his shoulder to his wrist.

The young man standing to his right was larger in both height and girth. He had fair skin and a stout physique. He had blonde hair tied back in a braided ponytail along with some blonde stubble on his round face. He wore a grey wool tunic under a set of brown leather armor, over which he wore a green and red tartan robe, held up by brown leather belt. A pair of fur lined, black leather boots covered his feet. His blue eyes were filled with worry as he played with his large hands nervously.

The last young man stood to the first's left. He was the smallest of them, standing even shorter than Merida. He had bleach blonde hair that struck straight up from his head and dull blue eyes that didn't seem to observe the world around him along with fair skin, a skinny build and rather large ears. He wore a brown tunic under his green and brown tartan robe, which was held up by a brown leather belt around his waist. His feet were covered with brown leather boots.

"Sae they just told ye ye had tae marry this guy?" the middle boy asked.

"Aye, William," she grumbled, glaring out at the sea, "Just oot o' th' blue, nae discussion or anythin'."

"'At ain't right," the short one said with a dazed voice.

"Thanks fer statin' th' obvious, Boyd," William sighed, rolling his eyes, causing the other boy to shrug dumbly.

"Are ye alright, Merida?" the large boy mumbled.

"Dae Ah look like Ah'm alright, Andra!?" Merida snapped, whirling around and glaring at the large boy with tear-filled eyes. The outburst caused Andra to jump back in fright and curl up on himself, playing with his hands even more as he looked away from her.

Merida sighed as she lowered her eyes.

"Ah'm sorry, Andra" she said, looking apologetically at the young man, "Ah didnae mean tae snap at ye."

"It's alright, Merida," William replied, patting Andra on the shoulder in an effort to relax him, "This thin' has got us all on edge."

"Yer nae th' ane who has tae marry a damn Viking fer some peace treaty," Merida growled, her anger rising again.

"Nae, but we're still makin' peace wi' a bunch of blood-thirsty savages at th' expense o' ane o' ma oldest friends," William replied, taking a step forward and pointing his finger at Merida. This seemed to pacify the princess, who folded her arms and sighed, looking back at the dark blue waters beyond the boat.

"Ah justâ€¦" she sighed, turning back to look at the boys, "It feels like Ah'm trapped. Ah keep looking fer a way out, but there ain't. At least, not without resortin' tae something'â€¦drastic."

The boys looked at her in confusion, but she declined to elaborate further.

"Ah feel like Ah'm a sheep bein' lead tae th' slaughter," Merida said, looking at her friends, "Ah know ma doom is approachin', but there's nothin' Ah can dae tae save maself."

"It might nae be 'at bad," Boyd spoke up, "Ah mean, ma parents were an arranged marriage, and they're happy. Sae are yers."

"Aye but 'at ain't th' same thing, Boyd," William replied, turning his attention to the smaller boy, "Yer parents, ma parents, Andra and Merida's parents are all from th' Highlands. Merida's would-be husband is a Viking. They arenae like us. They're a bunch o' blood-thirsty savages who like nothin' more than tae kill, destroy, plunder an' rape. Th' only way this cud be worse is if Merida had tae marry a damned Vandal."

Boyd became quite and his eyes fell to the deck as Merida hugged herself harder, becoming more agitated thanks to William's speech. William noticed and sighed, running his hand through his hair.

"Sorry, Merida," William said, "Ah shouldnae have said all 'at."

"Daenaie worry abit it, William," Merida replied, "It's nae like what ya said wasnae true."

"Merida!" the voice of Queen Elinor called from across the ship. Turning, Merida saw her mother approaching her.

"Merida, there ya are" the queen huffed, slightly out of breath.

"Yer Highness," the three boys said together, bowing to the queen.

"Oh, hello boys," Elinor replied, nodding to them, "Helpin' Merida

prepare fer today?"

"In a manner o' speakin'," William replied with a shrug, Andra and Boyd nodding in agreement.

"Good, but we're approachin' Berk now, and Ah have tae make sure Merida is ready," she explained, before waving the boys away, "Ya should all go find yer fathers."

The boys nodded before bowing again and leaving, waving to Merida as they went. She waved meekly back to them, before turning to face her mother. Elinor gave her a small smile, which Merida returned with a look of utter misery.

"Chin up now, Merida," Elinor stated, cupping her daughter's chin, "A princess does nae let others see her sorrow."

Merida sniffed and wiped her eyes on her sleeve, before turning back to her mother, forcing her face into a neutral expression.

"Very good," Elinor said, before taking Merida's hand and leading her below the ship's deck, "Now come along, we have tae get ya into yer dress."

Merida sighed, dreading what bundle of cloth and straps her mother was going to force her into.

Later,

To the north of the longships, amongst the crashing waves and the mighty glaciers, an island rose out of the churning sea. At first glance, the island seemed little more than a collection of massive rocks jutting up into the sky like a festering wound. Upon the top of the sheer cliffs that made up the edges of the island was relatively flatter land that allowed the growth of sparse vegetation in some areas and a thick forest near the center. Birds of various types could be seen flying about the island and sheep were grazing upon the sparse grass.

On the south side of the island, there was a cove that broke through the otherwise impassible cliff walls, providing the only safe harbor on the entire island. Within the cove, upon its rocky, dry shores, a village had been built. The settlement continued up from the cove, buildings of various sizes built up the sloping hills and surrounding cliff faces, encroaching towards the center of the island.

People made their way around the village, going from task to task. They were all large individuals, strong and muscular, both the men and the women. They all seemed to be dressed in either armor or heavy furs, and while they all possessed the same pale skin their hair color varied from pitch black to bright blonde to fiery red. The men wore long beards woven in complicated patterns, matched only by those the women had woven into their long hair.

One person however stood out amongst them. Where they were tall, he was short. Where they were muscular, he was skinny. Where they were intimidating and proud, he was shy and unsure. His hair was a dull auburn that hung loosely on his head, almost falling into his pale green eyes. He wore a brown, fur vest over a sea green wool tunic along with a pair of darker green trousers and awkwardly large brown,

fur-lined boots.

He made his way through the bustling crowds in his attempt to reach his destination. Everyone seemed to be doing something, and they were doing it in a hurry. Decorations were being hung up and preparations being made. The town was looking its best, which meant the town was looking its fiercest. Just in time too.

"Longships!" a lookout called from one of the watch towers,
"Highlanders! The Bear King approaches!"

Looking out into the harbor, he could just make out what the lookout had spotted. Four longships were approaching the island, their oars cutting through the water as the wind pushed against their sails, flags fluttering from the masts of the ships, each depicting the symbol of the Highland Kingdoms, the symbol of Clan DunBroch.

"Hiccup!" a loud voice called out catching the young man's attention. He looked in the direction that the voice had come from and found a large man lumbering up to him. He was a middle aged man who stood almost twice as tall as the young man. He had blue eyes and blonde hair which, because of his bald head, was only apparent through his large unibrow and his long, Fu Manchu-style mustache that has been braided elaborately and decorated with numerous ornaments. He wore a metal helm with long horns on either side, the one on the right held together by linen wrappings. He wore a black fur vest similar to the boy's along with a tan coarse tunic underneath it, and a pair of ill-fitting, brown and tan stripped trousers. Half of his right arm was missing, ending in a metal cup that extended in a makeshift hammer made of wood and a large rock tied together, while his other hand and arm were covered in old wrappings. In addition, his left leg was also missing, replaced with shoddily carved, wooden peg leg. A brown, fur lined boot covered his other foot.

"Hiccup!" he called again as he ran up, "There ya are, lad. Yer father's been lookin' fer ya."

"Great," the young man, Hiccup, said, rolling his eyes, "Where is he, Gobber?"

"Down by th' docks, o' course," Gobber stated, "Or did ya ferget we've got a hostile royal entourage comin' tae visit."

"Trust me, that's one thing I did not forget," Hiccup stated with a resigned sigh as he began to make his way towards the docks.

"Hey, cheer up, lad," Gobber replied, following Hiccup, "At least this way ya can actually help th' village fer a change. Ya know, unless th' Bear King chops yer head off fer bein' too weak an' pathetic fer his daughter an' restarts th' war."

"Thanks Gobber," Hiccup sighed, rolling his eyes, "I can always rely on you for moral support."

"It's what Ah'm here fer," Gobber replied, completely missing Hiccup's sarcasm.

Hiccup said nothing as the two of them made their way down to the simple wooden docks, where a large group of Vikings were waiting for

the approaching ships. At the head of the group was a truly massive man, standing a head taller than most of the already impressively sized men. He had thick, auburn hair, stern, pale green eyes and an impressively large beard that hung down to his barrel chest, the ends tied in knots. He wore a dark green tunic over his massive frame, along the brown trousers and brown, leather boots. A large leather belt, studded with iron and held up by a belt buckle depicting a snarling dragon, a kilt of iron scalemail hanging from it. He wore a mighty horned iron helmet on his head and studded leather bracers on his wrists. A large, brown, fur cape hung from his shoulders, held up by iron clasps depicting the same snarling dragon.

Next to the man, on his right, stood another large man. He had jet black hair, a black beard of stubble and dark brown eyes. He wore a dark grey, sleeveless tunic, along with matching trousers and brown leather boots. He wore a studded leather belt around his waist, secured with an iron belt buckle, and a scalemail kilt hanging from it. He wore bracers made of padded cloth and twine on his wrists, and a horned iron helmet on his head. A brown, fur cape hung from his shoulders, held up by metal clasps.

On the other man's side stood a large muscular woman. She had straw blonde hair which was held back in a braid, and piercing blue eyes. She wore a brown, leather breastplate and a skirt made of individual strips of red, studded leather. She wore a small, brown fur cape held up by metal clasps and brown leather boots. An iron helmet with tall horns sat on her head.

With the two adults were two children the same age as Hiccup's age. With the man was a boy with spikey black hair, dark brown eyes, and a pug nose. He wore a green linen tunic and a black fur vest over his muscular physique and a pair of fur-lined, brown, leather boots on his feet. He wore a pair of dark grey trousers, held up by a dark grey, leather belt with an iron belt buckle. He had brown, leather bracers on his wrists and an iron helmet decorated with black goat horns on his head.

With the woman was a girl with straw blonde hair held back in a long braid along with a red, studded leather headband, though she still had long strands that flanked her face and bangs that obscured the left of her piercing blue eyes. She wore a sea green tunic and tight black trousers over her slim, athletic physique. In addition, she wore a skirt made of red, studded leather straps held up by a belt decorated with small skulls. Also, she wore brown, fur-lined boots, tan wrappings around her wrists and lower arms, and iron, spiked pauldrons on her shoulders.

Hiccup forced his way through the crowd of Vikings that was behind the five people, stumbling as he reached the end, causing the boy to snort and the girl to roll her eyes.

"Nice of you to show up," the girl commented, folding her arms and turning to look at the longships, which were in the process of docking.

"Sorry, had big, important stuff that needed taking care of," Hiccup explained weakly as he straightened his clothes.

"Probably fell into a ditch tripping over those scrawny legs of yours," the boy chuckled, glancing at Hiccup who glared

back.

"That's enough, Snotlout," the man behind him said, eyeing him.

"Sorry," he replied, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment.

"Hiccup," the large man stated, catching the boy's attention, "Son."

"Hey Dad," Hiccup replied awkwardly, looking up at his father.

"Today's an important day, Hiccup," the large man stated seriously, looking Hiccup dead in the eye, "Everythin' has to go right."

"Yeah, of course, I know that," Hiccup said, rubbing his right arm nervously.

"Good, so ya know I need ya to beâ€¦well not you," his father stated, struggling to find the words he needed.

"Good luck with that, right Astrid?" Snotlout snorted, turning to look at the girl. She ignored him while the man behind him smacked him in the back of his head, shutting Snotlout up.

"I'm not sure I can really do that, Dad," Hiccup began nervously before noticing all the people eyeing him angrily, before forcing a smile on his face, "But I will, I will totally not be me. Totally."

"That's what I like to hear," his father replied, smiling at him, before turning his attention to the ships. Hiccup turned around, seeing the four ships had docked and soldiers dressed in tartan robes and metal armor, pouring out onto the docks, putting all the Vikings on edge. A few moments later, a herald forced his way to the front of the group before blaring the large brass horn he was carrying and snapping to attention.

"Presentin' King Fergus, th' Bear King, Head o' Clan DunBroch, Lord o' th' Highland Kingdoms an' his sons, th' Princes Hamish, Harris an' Hubert!"

When the herald was finished, the crowd of soldiers separated, allowing Fergus and his sons to walk to the front of the group. The triplets looked around nervously, eyeing the Vikings with fear filled eyes while Fergus locked eyes with Hiccup's father, his gaze never wavering as he approached.

"Stoick," he practically spat standing eye to eye with the chief.

"Fergus," Stoick replied, making a face like the word left a bad taste in his mouth.

"This is yer boy?" Fergus asked, looking down at Hiccup and clearly not impressed with what he saw.

"He is," Stoick replied simply, "Where's yer girl?"

"She'll be along," Fergus answered as the herald blew his horn again.

"Presentin' Lord Duff Macintosh, Head o' Clan Macintosh an' his son, William!" the herald called as William walked towards the front of the group with an older man, clearly his father. Duff Macintosh was a lanky man with a wiry build. He had jet black hair that puffed out in all directions with a matching chinstrap beard and blue eyes. He wore a red and green tartan robe and nothing else, showing off his bare chest, with a leather belt around his waist and leather, fur-lined, pointed shoes on his feet. He had swirling patterns painted on his arms and face in blue warpaint.

Duff took a position to Fergus' right, with William to his as well. William looked over Hiccup, raising an eyebrow at him, before sighing and shaking his head in disbelief.

"Presentin' Lord Gerald MacGuffin, Head o' Clan MacGuffin an' his son, Andra!" the herald called as Andra walked up to the front of the group accompanied by his father. Gerald MacGuffin was slightly larger than his son, standing a few inches taller and a few pounds heavier. Unlike his son's nervous expression, Gerald's was calm and serious. His blonde hair was tied into short pig tails on either side of his head, his thick mustache worn in a similar way. He had an equally thick beard and his eyebrows were so thick they obscured his blue eyes. He wore a grey tunic under brown, studded leather armor, over which he wore a green and red tartan robe. He had a brown leather belt around his waist, which a sheathed knife was slung from, along with brown leather shoes on his feet.

Gerald took a position to Fergus' left, with Andra on his left, mirroring the Macintoshes. Andra looked at Hiccup, before glancing at William, who shrugged in reply.

"Presentin' Lord Cameron Dingwall, Head o' Clan Dingwall, an' his son, Boyd!" the herald called yet again as Boyd and an older man walked down the docks. Cameron Dingwall was short and stout, much like his son, with a shock of white hair that shot straight up, accompanied by a thick mustache. His face was reddish in color and he had dull blue eyes. He wore a dark grey tunic under a green and red tartan robe along with a brown leather belt and a brown leather boots.

They took up positions to Fergus' left, in front of the taller MacGuffins. Boyd didn't even glance at Hiccup, instead staring off into space.

"An' finally, presentin' Queen Elinor DunBroch, Lady o' th' Highland Kingdoms an' her daughter, Princess Merida!" the herald called one last time, as the king and the lords stepped aside to let the soon to be approaching woman walk by unimpeded.

"I bet you she's fat," Snotlout whispered, "Fat and with warts."

"If he's lucky, she'll be lame so he has to carry her around all the time," Astrid mumbled, glaring at the Highlanders "That way he can have an excuse to not be a skinny weakling."

Hiccup ignored the comments outwardly, but inwardly he was terrified.

He was about to meet the girl he was going to marry. The girl he was going to share his bed with. The girl he was going to share the rest of his life with. This was huge and he had absolutely no idea what to expect. She could be hideous, like Snotlout said, she could be completely normal, she could be an assassin here to kill him and his father, she could beâ€¦

Hiccup's thoughts trailed off as Elinor and Merida came into view. Merida was now wearing a sky blue dress with gold trim, along with a gold sash around her waist. A wimple covered her mass of red hair, leaving a lone curl to stick out just above her eyes. Her blue eyes met with his green and he felt his heart skip a beat.

"â€¦she could be the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," Hiccup mumbled to himself, so quiet that no one else could hear him.

"What?" Snotlout whined quietly, "Are you kidding me!?"

Astrid said nothing, instead choosing to glare at Merida, who glanced at her, briefly glared back at her before turning her attention back to Hiccup.

"Greetins," she stated awkwardly, curtsying to him "Ah am Merida o' Clan DunBroch, yer betrothed. It is aâ€¦pleasure tae meet ya."

Hiccup immediately noticed the awkwardness in her speech. She no doubt had as little say in all this as he did, which would be none. She definitely did not want to be here and was probably not as pleasantly surprised about seeing him as he was of seeing her.

As Hiccup thought, Merida held out her hand for him to take. He hesitantly reached out and took her hand in his, before bowing to her.

"Greetings," Hiccup copied, "I am Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third of Berk, your betrothed. It is a pleasure to meet you as well."

He then quickly leaned down and kissed her hand before straightening up, allowing her to yank her hand back, looking away from him.

"Well, now 'at everyone is introduced," Fergus stated, "Ah guess we move on to th' next order o' business."

"Right, we'll go to arena and we can discuss th' exacts of th' treaty while my son has his honor bought," Stoick replied as he turned to go along with the two groups of people.

"Honor bought?" Hiccup asked no one in particular, "What honor bought?"

"You didn't know?" Astrid commented, "You have to fight the Princess' champion to prove you're worthy of her."

"Who's her champion?" Hiccup questioned.

"My best guess?" Astrid said, turning as she continued to walk away, indicating behind Hiccup, "One of those guys."

Turning, Hiccup saw William, Andra and Boyd walking by, each of them glaring at him.

"Have fun," Snotlout chuckled, bumping Hiccup's shoulder as he walked by. Hiccup gulped nervously before reluctantly following.

A/N: Thank you all for the amazing feedback on the last chapter, it really pushed me to get this next one out as soon as possible. I hope you guys liked this one. As you may have noticed, I went with the idea of the young lords being old friends of Merida. I felt that with her father being old friends with the lords, she would have met them as a child and befriended them. Also hope you guys liked the names I chose for them. Also trying to cut back on the Scottish accent, because a few people said they found it hard to read and I don't want to pull you guys out of the story. Once again, feedback is always helpful, so please review!

3. Decorum

****Chapter 3: Decorum****

Near the center of the village, an arena had been built, dug into the solid rock of the island itself. People gathered around the top edge of the arena where a caged dome had been built over the top. At one end of the arena, looming over it, was a seating area where Stoick, Fergus, Elinor, Merida and the three lords sat, mostly in chairs that had been hastily provided for them. Everyone else was gathered around the lip of the arena, looking down into it.

The arena had a simple dirt floor and the walls were made of hardened stone that was scorched in many places. On one side of the arena, beneath the seating area, were a number of wooden doors with chains attached to outside, allowing them to be opened. On the opposite side there was a ramp leading down into the arena from the outside, cut off by a portcullis.

Inside the arena, Hiccup stood alone, a sword and a round wooden shield sitting next to him while William, Andra and Boyd stood a few feet in front of him.

"So umâ€¦how does this work?" Hiccup asked, nervously scratching the back of his head.

"Really?" William asked, surprised, "Ya daenae know?"

"People don't really keep me in the loop around here," Hiccup replied with a shrug.

William sighed and shook his head in disgust.

"Ya challenge ane o' us tae single combat tae prove 'at yer worthy o' th' princess' hand," he explained, crossing his arms and glaring at Hiccup.

"Wait," Hiccup stated, holding his hands up, "I get to pick which one of you I fight?"

"Aye," William replied, rolling his eyes, "Since it's supposed tae be

ya offerin' th' challenge fer her hand, 'at means ya get tae pick who yer challengin'. It's all basically just a ceremony recreatin' th' old story of a prince rescuin' a princess an' takin' her as his bride."

"So, we're not really fighting?" Hiccup questioned, "Like not to kill each other, right?"

"Aye, technically we're nae tryin' tae kill each other," William answered before grinning savagely at him, "But accidents dae happen."

Hiccup gulped nervously, eyeing each of the boys. William looked like he was bred to fight, and was itching to use that sword strapped to his back. Andra didn't seem to have quite the same fighting instinct as he nervously played with his hands. But Hiccup was sure if that he chose the large boy that it wouldn't take him long to snap the Viking teen like a twig. So Hiccup's eyes turned to Boyd, the blonde's eyes glazed over as he stared at nothing, trapped inside his own little world. Looking Boyd over, Hiccup saw that he wasn't much bigger than he was, in fact Hiccup had a few inches on him. He smirked as he made his decision.

"Well I guess I'll fight him then," Hiccup stated, pointing to Boyd.

"What!?" William asked, throwing his hands into the air out of exasperation. Duff Macintosh made a similar movement next to Fergus as Cameron Dingwall smiled at Hiccup's choice. Fergus raised his eyebrow at the choice as Elinor offered no comment. Merida however, glared down at the arena, her icy blue eyes never looking away from Hiccup. Stoick nodded before pushing himself to his feet and raising his hands, drawing all attention to himself.

"The challenger has chosen Boyd Dingwall as Princess Merida's champion!" he declared, "The two will now fight to determine if the challenger, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third, is worthy of Princess Merida's hand!"

As Stoick talked, William and Andra began to move to the side of the arena to be out of the way of the fight. As he walked by, William paused and placed a hand on Boyd's shoulder, seemingly snapping the young man back to reality.

"Yer up, Boyd," William said, giving the blonde's arm a squeeze, "Give him a cut fer me."

Boyd nodded as Andra tossed a shield and an axe over to him. As he picked them up, Hiccup picked up his weapons as well, barely able to hold his shield aloft. As Andra and William stepped to the side, Stoick lifted his hand into the air.

"Begin!" he shouted, throwing his hand down.

Hiccup and Boyd faced off against each other, shields raised and weapons at the ready.

"So, this is just kind of ceremony, right?" Hiccup asked as he and Boyd began to slowly circle each other.

"Right," Boyd agreed.

"So, no need to really hurt each other, right?" Hiccup continued, struggling to hold his weapon and shield up, "I mean, it's not real after all."

"Yer right," Boyd replied, giving a slight nod, "Ah mean, if Ah were tae kill ya, 'at wud probably start another war."

"Same if I killed you," Hiccup replied with a nervous chuckle.

"'At's nae possible," Boyd stated matter-of-factly.

"Okayâ€|" Hiccup said awkwardly, "So what do you say we keep this simple? Just play it to the crowd, and call it a day, you know?"

"Nae, Ah daenae think sae," Boyd replied, slowly shaking his head as his eyes seemed to actually focus on Hiccup for the first time, "See, ma da an' ma countrymen are countin' on me now tae beat ya good."

Hiccup felt his stomach drop as a chill ran up his spine.

"Ah mean sure Ah cannae kill ya, but ma da' is an important lord in th' king's court an' Merida's been ma friend fer a long time. Let me tell ya, none o' them like ya. Th' king doesnae like ya. Ma father doesnae like ya. Th' princess doesnae like ya. And Ah daenae like ya."

Hiccup gulped as he felt his palms get sweaty, having trouble keeping his grip on his sword.

"Sae Ah cannae kill ya because we need this treaty, but 'at doesnae mean Ah cannae hurt ya, cannae maim ya. I mean nae much. Cannae cut off a hand or anythin'. Maybe an ear, or even a foot."

Hiccup's face paled at the thought as Boyd played with his axe while the crowd began to grow restless.

"King has ane foot," Boyd commented, "He gets by fine. Anyway, Ah'm tired o' talkin', let's fight!"

Before Hiccup could say anything more, Boyd charged at him, axe raised and a war call on his tongue. Hiccup quickly raised his shield, blocking the weapon as it dug into the wooden shield. The shock of the blow knocked Hiccup back, barely able to keep a hold on his shield as Boyd pulled his axe free of the shield.

"Yeah, Boyd!" William shouted from the side, shaking his fists, "Get him!"

Just as Hiccup was able to recover, Boyd ran up, his axe raised to strike again. Hiccup put his shield up to defend, but Boyd instead kicked the shield, sending Hiccup tumbling backwards, his shield tumbling away. As Hiccup scrambled to his feet, picking up his sword just as Boyd rushed him. Boyd swung at him which Hiccup managed to clumsily block with his sword. As he did, Boyd quickly slammed Hiccup with his shield, sending Hiccup tumbling away again, dropping his

sword as he did so.

The Scots cheered again as Hiccup was knocked to the ground, including Merida who jumped from her seat and throwing her hands into the air, earning her a stern glare from her mother. Merida grumbled as she sat back down, while Stoick put his hand over his face, hiding his look of embarrassment.

Back in the arena, Boyd didn't let Hiccup recover, rushing the downed Viking teen with his axe raised. Hiccup's eyes widened in surprise as he rolled to the side, dodging the axe head as it dug into the ground. As Hiccup pushed himself to his knees, Boyd charged at him again with a wicked war call. He swung for Hiccup's neck, forcing the young man to duck, a few hairs being sliced off by Boyd's blade. As Boyd stumbled forward, Hiccup rolled past him, running over to where he had dropped his sword. He grabbed it and turned to face Boyd as the Highlander rushed at him. Hiccup raised his sword as Boyd slashed at him again, their two weapons clanging against each other, sending sparks flying as they met.

As the two pushed against each other, Boyd quickly spun around and smashed his shield into Hiccup's side, sending the young man sprawling. As Hiccup tried to pick himself up, Boyd ran up and kicked him in the side, knocking the young man onto his back as all the air was forced from his lungs.

"Cut his head off, Boyd!" William shouted from the side as Andra clapped his big hands in excitement. Meanwhile, up in the stands, the Vikings groaned at Hiccup's display while the Highlanders cheered. Merida quietly cheered from her seat, pumping her fists while making sure her mother didn't see her.

"Come on, Hiccup!" Gobber shouted, "Daenae just lie there. Dae somethin'!"

Hiccup groaned as he saw Boyd step over him, axe pointed at him.

"Sae, which foot will it be?" Boyd asked nonchalantly, "Th' left or th' right?"

"Well, I was thinking maybe this one!" Hiccup shouted as he kicked his foot up, hitting Boyd in the back, sending the young man stumbling forward. Hiccup took the opportunity to roll to his feet and quickly lash out with his sword. The blade found Boyd's shoulder, cutting slightly into the flesh and drawing blood.

Boyd hissed in pain, dropping his axe and his shield as he grasped the wound while stumbling to a stop. Hiccup took the advantage, rushing up to Boyd's side and pointing his sword at the other boy's neck.

"Looks like I win," Hiccup commented, trying hard to catch his breath.

"Lucky swing," Boyd grumbled, glaring at Hiccup.

"Better to be lucky than good," Hiccup replied, shrugging his shoulders.

Up in the stands, Stoick sighed and rolled his eyes, thanking the gods for his son's mediocre victory as the Highlanders grumbled at Boyd's sudden defeat. Stoick quickly stepped back up and raised his hands to catch everyone's attention again.

"The challenger has succeeded in defeating the princess' champion!" he declared, a thankful smile on his face as the Vikings cheered while the Highlanders quietly groaned, "He has proven himself worthy of the princess' hand in marriage!"

Merida quietly seethed in her chair, glaring down at Hiccup, her fists bunched into fists around the silky material of her dress. She had truly been hoping that Boyd would kill him, one way or the other, and release her from this fate. She didn't think of the consequence such an action would have on her people, she just cared about her freedom, about not being chained to this complete stranger's side for the rest of her life. Her mind raced as she thought for some way, anyway, to escape from this.

As she fumed, a noise to her side caught her attention. Glancing over, she saw her brothers standing next to her, having snuck over to her chair. One held her bow in his hands while another carried her belt-quiver.

"What are ya three doin'?" she whispered, raising an eyebrow at them.

"We saw ya were upset," the one in front of her said.

"And we know usin' yer bow makes ya feel better," the one holding the bow explained.

"How did ya find it?" she questioned, "Mom locked it away fer th' trip. Said she wudnae give it back until after th' ceremony."

"We know where everythin' is," the one holding the quiver stated matter-of-factly, shrugging his shoulders as he did.

"Why are ya givin' me these now?" she asked, confused.

"Like Ah said, we know usin' yer bow makes ya feel better," the brother in front said, a smirk on his face, "An' we think we know someone yad like tae shoot at."

A smirk mirroring her brother's crossed Merida's face as she reached out and took her bow and quiver before kissing each of her brothers on the head and darting off, no one seeing her leave due to being distracted by Stoick's speech.

"Now that the challenger has proven himself," Stoick called to the crowd as Hiccup stood in the middle of the arena, awkwardly scratching the back of his head and smiling while William, Boyd and Andra glared at him from the side, "It comes to the Princess Merida to accept his hand. What say you, Princess?"

Stoick turned to where Merida had been sitting, everyone's eyes following as well, only to find her seat completely empty. A mumble of confusion went through the crowd as Fergus and Elinor looked at each other in shock.

"Nae!" Merida's voice echoed across the arena from where she was standing on the lip of the top of the arena, her wimple having been discarded, allowing her wild red hair to flow around her like a fiery aura, her quiver strapped around her waist and her bow clenched in her hand, "Ah will nae marry him or anyone else 'at Ah'm told tae!"

As the crowd gasped in shock, Merida drew an arrow from her quiver and notched it in her bow before aiming it at Hiccup.

"This is what Ah think yer worthy of!" she shouted at Hiccup, her eyes full of fury.

"â€|Uh oh," Hiccup mumbled to himself, his eyes wide as Merida loosed the arrow, sending it flying at him. Hiccup dove to the side, the arrow just missing him, slicing his shirt as he flopped onto his stomach, kicking up a small cloud of dirt as he grunted in pain.

"Get up, lad!" Gobber bellowed, catching his attention as Merida aimed another arrow at him, "Move!"

Hiccup scrambled to his feet and practically crawled away in his hurry to move out of Merida's line of sight. She shot at him again, barely missing his foot as the arrow buried its head in the hard earth, causing Hiccup to trip over the shaft and go rolling onto his back.

"What the Hel is she doin'!?" Stoick demanded, turning to glare at Fergus.

"Does it look like Ah know!?" Fergus shouted back, a look of bewilderment of his face.

"Well, ya better figure it out or we are going to have a big problem," Stoick growled before turning back to the arena as Merida notched another arrow, "Somebody grab her!"

Merida glanced over her shoulder, seeing a Viking man approached her, hands raised to grab her. Merida quickly hopped away from him as he tried to grab her, unnotching her arrow and taking both it and her bow into one hand. Leaping forward, she slipped through one of the gaps in the dome cage, grabbing onto the bars with her free hand. Turning around, she swung herself over to the wall, grabbed onto it, before hopping off and landing on the arena floor, rolling to a stop. As she rolled to her feet, she renotched her arrow and pointed it at Hiccup, barely short of breath.

"Whoa," Hiccup whispered in surprise, forgetting for a moment that she was trying to kill him.

"Daenae just stand there, Hiccup," Gobber shouted, snapping him back to reality, "Get yer shield or she's goin' tae turn ya into a pin cushion!"

As Gobber said this, Merida shot at Hiccup again, who barely managed to juke out of the way, causing the arrow to strike the stone wall behind him.

"Merida, stop this!" Elinor bellowed from the viewing area, as Hiccup

scrambled for his shield, "Daenae ya loose another arra!"

Her demands fell on deaf ears however as Merida notched another arrow, her eyes never leaving Hiccup, her face set in a look of fierce determination.

"How did she get her bow an' arras!?" Elinor demanded, turning to Fergus who looked at her in bewilderment, "Ah locked them up!"

As she said this, a thought occurred to her. She whirled around, looking at her triplet sons who were sitting nearby with looks of complete innocence on their identical faces.

"Boys," she said harshly, catching their attentions, "Did ya hae somethin' tae dae wi' this?"

"Umâ€|" one of them said as the same nervous expressions crossed all their faces, "We may hae stumbled upon them an' decided tae return them tae Merida. We figured she lost them!"

"Boys!" she shouted, causing the triplets to flinch, "Why wud ya dae 'at!?"

"We daenae like him!" one of the boys declared, the same angry expression on all their faces, "We think this whole thing is stupid! Merida doesnae want tae marry him, why should she hae tae!?"

Elinor almost screeched in frustration, clenching her hands into fists and shaking them, before she stormed off.

"Where are ya goin'!?" Fergus asked, watching his wife leave.

"Ah'm puttin' an end tae this!" she shouted back, not bothering to turn around and look at him.

"This is all your fault!" the black haired Viking man shouted, walking up to Fergus and pointing a finger in his face, "I knew this whole treaty was a bad idea! This was all just a trick to get them into our village and kill us all!"

An angry look crossed Fergus' face, but before he could say anything, Duff Macintosh stepped in front of him and shoved the Viking man in the chest.

"Daenae ya go shovin' yer grubby fingers in ma king's face!" Duff shouted, poking the man in the chest.

"Don't touch me, you backstabbing Highlander!" the dark-haired Viking growled in anger as he slapped Duff's hand away from him.

"Ah'll put ma hands wherever Ah damn well please, ya paranoid savage!" Duff yelled, giving the black-haired Viking another shove.

"I told you not to touch me!" the Viking shouted before cocking his fist back and punching Duff hard in the face, sending the Highlander reeling.

"Hey!" Gerald McGuffin bellowed, running up and hitting the Viking man hard in the stomach, causing him to double over and allowing

Gerald to grab him by the shoulders and toss him against the railing around the edge of the arena. As Gerald moved towards the Viking man again, the blonde Viking woman stepped in front of him and decked the lord hard in the face, sending him reeling as well.

"Ya best back off, lassie!" Cameron Dingwall declared as he stepped between the woman and Gerald, pointing his finger up at her, "Or Ah might reconsider ma stance about strikin' a woman!"

"Well, unfortunately for you, I have nothin' to reconsider, little man!" the woman declared before punching Cameron in the face as well before kicking him in the chest sending the smaller man rolling away.

"Stop fightin'!" Fergus declared as the others began to recover while other Highlanders and Vikings had begun fighting as well, "Show a little decorum!"

"Spitelout's right, isn't he?" Stoick asked, causing Fergus to turn around only to find the Viking chieftain glaring at him.

"What?" Fergus asked, incredulously.

"This was all a trick to get us to let our guards down!" Stoick shouted, leaning right up into Fergus' face.

"Are ya daft!?" Fergus asked, his anger boiling up, "Why wud we want tae come tae this gods-forsaken island tae kill an enemy we'ae already beat!?"

"Oh, is that what ya think!?" Stoick demanded, his hands clenching into fists.

"Aye, it is!" Fergus declared, his face turning red from anger, "Ah daenae even remember why Ah wanted an alliance with ya inbred bunch o' hooligans!"

"Inbred hooligans!?" Stoick bellowed, "Who are ya callin' inbred hooligans!?"

"Ya, ya great hairy hooligan!" Fergus shouted back, spittle flying from his mouth, "An' Ah'll be damned if Ah give ya ma only daughter!"

"Well then I guess this treaty's off, which means I can do this!" Stoick declared before punching Fergus hard across the face, sending the king reeling. Catching himself, Fergus glared at the chieftain before charging at him with a hateful cry, tackling into him, sending both men rolling across the ground as they began to beat on each other.

Meanwhile, down in the arena, a group of Vikings were desperately trying to open the portcullis blocking the path into the structure while William, Andra and Boyd were rushing up to Merida as she aimed yet another arrow at Hiccup while he scrambled for his shield.

"Merida stop!" William shouted as he approached her, arms held out to grab her. Merida quickly spun around and pointed her bow at him, causing the young lord to stop in his tracks and throw his hands into

the air.

"Back off!" Merida shouted, waving her bow between all three of them, "All o' ya back off!"

The three young men quickly did as they were told, allowing Merida to turn her attention back to Hiccup, who managed to pick up his shield, and hold it between the two of them. Growling, Merida shot her arrow at him, hitting the shield dead center, the arrow going so far in the head burst out the other side, stopping only an inch from Hiccup's face, causing him to gulp nervously.

Screaming in anger and frustration, Merida ran at Hiccup, causing the young man's eyes to go wide as he tried to back pedal away from her, almost tripping over his own two feet. As Merida reached Hiccup, she grabbed onto his shield and yanked it to the side, pulling it out of the Viking's hands and sending it tumbling away. Before Hiccup could recover, Merida grabbed her bow with both hands and swung it, hitting the young man on the side of the head and sending him tumbling to the ground. As Hiccup groaned in pain, Merida stepped over him, notching another arrow and pointing it right between his eyes less than a foot away.

"Whoa!" Hiccup shouted, holding up his hands in attempt to get Merida to stop, "Hold on! How about we talk about this, okay!?"

"There's nothin' tae talk about!" she shouted, putting her foot on Hiccup's chest to make sure he didn't get up, "If Ah kill ya, then Ah'm free o' this marriage an' can determine ma own fate!"

Even as his body was frozen in fear, Hiccup's mind was still running a mile a minute, giving him a moment of clarity as a thought occurred to him.

"And then what?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"What?" Merida asked, blinking in surprise, caught off guard by the comment.

"And then what will you do?" Hiccup clarified, the fear slowly leaving his eyes.

"Ah-Ahâ€¦!" Merida mumbled as her mind raced, realizing she hadn't thought of a plan past this point. Would she try to fight her way out? Would she surrender? What would be the consequences for her actions? What were the consequences already? As Merida tried to puzzle this out, the portcullis opened and her mother stormed in, a group of Vikings right behind her.

"Merida stop!" Elinor shouted, snapping her daughter out of her thoughts. Looking over, she saw her mother and the Viking quickly approaching. She looked back at Hiccup and then at the arrow she had pointed at him. She quickly glanced back and forth between the two then she shouted in anger and frustration before shooting the arrow into the ground next to Hiccup's head. As Hiccup let out a sigh of relief, Merida whirled around and glared at Elinor whose face was only a few inches from her own. The two glared at each other for a few moments before Elinor reached out and grabbed Merida's arm hard.

"Are ya insane!" she shouted, pulling Merida away from Hiccup, "Dae ya know what ya'ae done!?"

Merida said nothing, instead choosing to glare at her own feet. This enraged Elinor further, causing her to reach down and grab Merida's chin, forcing her head up.

"Look!" she demanded forcing her daughter to look at the fighting going on around the arena, causing Merida to hiss in pain, "Look what ya an' yer thrice damned bow hae caused!"

Reaching down, she snatched the bow out of Merida's hand while the girl was distracted looking at the chaos happening around her before tossing it aside, sending it clattering across the ground.

"Now I have to fix this mess too," Elinor grumbled as she walked towards the center of the arena, taking a deep breathe to regain a modicum of her composure. Looking around, she took a moment to watch the fighting before straightening up to her full regal height, a look calm determination on her face.

"'AT'S ENOUGH!" she shouted, her voice ringing off the stone walls of the arena. The authority in her voice caused everyone to pause in their fighting, including Fergus and Stoick who had grabbed onto each other, their fists cocked to punch one another in the face. They looked at Elinor in surprise.

"Chief Stoick, Ah believe 'at there are some matters 'at ya need tae discuss with ma husband an' Ah," she stated, looking right into the Viking chieftains eyes, "Is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

"Erâ€|yes," Stoick replied, awkwardly letting go of Fergus and lowering his fist, "The Great Hall should do."

"Excellent," Elinor said with a slight smile, "Ah will meet ya an' ma husband there shortly."

Stoick nodded slowly, not seeming to fully understand what had just happened, nor did anyone else as the Vikings and the Highlanders picked themselves up and brushed themselves off. As Stoick and Fergus made their way away from the crowd, Elinor turned to face Hiccup and Merida, the Viking teen having managed to pick himself up off the ground again.

"As fer ya two. Ya are comin' wi' me," she said in a tone that brokered no argument, causing the two teens to glance awkwardly at each other before looking away just as quickly.

A/N: Another week, another chapter. Wasn't sure about this one at the beginning but I really started to like how it flowed together as the chapter went. Hope you guys liked it as well. If you guys have any comments, questions or criticisms, be sure to review! Also, make sure you have your private message on or I can't reply to you! Thanks again!

4. Negotiations

****Chapter 4: Negotiations****

The Great Hall stood near the center of the village, further inland than the arena, sitting on a rocky outcropping that allowed it to look over the entire village. It was longer than it was tall, giving it a squat look, with a curved roof but a square base. It was made out of dark brown wood while the foundation was made of grey stone.

Stoick lead the way as they approached the Great Hall's large wooden doors, their surface carved with depictions of great heroes and dragons, Hiccup at his side while Elinor, Fergus and Merida followed behind. Reaching the doors, Stoick flung both of them open before stepping inside, the others following him. Inside, the roof was supported by two rows of thick wooden columns while rows of wooden long tables were on both sides of the room.

"Now, can someone explain to me what in Thor's name just happened!?" Stoick demanded, whirling around to glare at Fergus and his family, "Because it looks to me like yer daughter just tried to murder my son!"

"Ah'm sure Merida has a perfectly logical explanation fer all o' this," Fergus asserted before turning to look at his daughter. In response, Merida's eyes slowly fell, unable to look Fergus directly in the eye.

"Or perhaps not," Fergus said, shaking his head in disappointment. He turned around to find Stoick glaring at him.

"Sounds like we still have a score to settle, ye and I," Stoick said threateningly, stepping towards Fergus.

"Oh, we dae, dae we?" Fergus replied angrily, his hands clenching into fists.

Before either of them could come to blows though, Elinor stepped between them, an angry look on her face. Reaching up, she grabbed both of their ears and gave them a sharp tug downwards, bringing both leaders' heads down to her eye level.

"Ah think we'ae had quite enough fightin', thank ye very much," she stated, giving each of them a pointed look before releasing them, allowing both men to stand upright and rub their ears in pain. Hiccup's mouth hung open and his eyes were wide after seeing such a small woman manhandle his father. He quickly composed himself as he noticed Merida looking at him.

Glancing at her, he noticed that dust and grit had accumulated on her dress, probably from when she had tumbled into the arena. He also noticed a few rips and tears in the material, no doubt made by all the physical activity that she had perform for which the dress was not made for.

What also drew his eye was her wild mass of red hair. His first thought upon seeing it was how it had all fit under that wimple. That thought eventually gave way to just how red and wild it was, like fire given solid form. He couldn't help but notice, even in the arena when she was trying to use him for target practice, how utterly it seemed to fit her. Thinking back to how demure and fragile she looked when he had first seen her, he couldn't help but feel a sense of

incompleteness from it, that he hadn't been seeing the full picture. Now that he saw her like this, he could understand why. This new Merida, the real Merida, easily replaced the one he had seen before as the prettiest girl he had ever seen. Even as her icy blue eyes turned to him and glared.

"Whit are ye lookin' at?" she practically growled, causing him to flinch as he snapped back to reality.

"Iâ€¦umâ€¦that isâ€¦I mean," Hiccup mumbled, tripping over his words as he tried to think of something to say before Merida sighed in disgust, turning away from him as she rolled her eyes before quickly walking over to the other side of the room and sitting at one of the long tables, pointed not looking at him. Hiccup sighed as he took a seat at the long table near him, looking over at his father talking with Fergus and Elinor.

"How do I know that this wasn't some plot to get yer people in here and kill us all!?" Stoick shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at Fergus.

"Ye're th' ane who invited us here, remember!?" Fergus shouted back, looking at Stoick like he was insane.

"Yes, for the treaty that ye purposed!" Stoick retaliated, getting even more in Fergus' face.

"Well, we're nae attackin' ye now, are we?" Elinor interrupted, raising an eyebrow at Stoick.

"What's yer point?" Stoick asked.

"Ma point is if we're attackin' ye, we're doin' a pretty poor job o' it, seein' as Ah stopped the fightin' an' asked tae talk," Elinor pointed out.

Stoick was quieted by this, slowly lowering his hand and taking a step back.

"I suppose ye have a point there," Stoick relented.

"Ah suppose Ah dae," Elinor replied, a somewhat smug smirk on her face.

"Then that brings us back to what actually happened down there," Stoick stated, turning a stern eye towards Merida, "Why was yer daughter tryin' to kill my son?"

Merida looked away, not willing to meet Stoick's gaze.

"'At's somethin' Ah'ae been wonderin' maself," Fergus agreed, looking at his daughter as well, causing Merida to wilt under the combined gazes.

"Merida is prone tae th' occasional unlady-like outbursts," Elinor explained, catching Stoick's attention, "She saw th' fightin' an' probably jist felt th' urge tae join in."

"'At's nae true, an' ye know it!" Merida shouted, jumping to her feet and pointing her finger at her mother.

"'At's enough, Merida!" Elinor shouted back, trying to silence her daughter.

"Nae!" Merida yelled, bristling, before turning to Stoick, "Th' reason Ah went doon there is because Ah want nothin' tae dae wi' this alliance or this marriage. Ah'm bein' forced agin ma wull tae marry someone Ah daenae even know. From a people 'at ma people were at war wi' nae sae lang ago. Ah had nae say, nae opinion, an' nae options, sae Ah panicked. Ah saw whit Ah thought wus ma way oot an' Ah took it. Ah'm sorry, Ah know Ah shouldnae hae done it, an' Ah daenae want tae start another war but Ah also daenae want tae marry yer son!"

Merida paused and looked over at Hiccup. Their eyes met and a look of contempt passed over her fair features.

"Ah daenae want anythin' tae dae wi' him," she stated before turning back to face Stoick, not noticing Hiccup's face fall slightly.

"Ah'ae had jist about enough o' ye!" Elinor declared angrily as she marched up to her daughter.

"Good!" Merida declared, glaring up at her mother, "Because Ah've had jist about enough o' ye!"

"An' jist whit is 'at supposed tae mean!?" Elinor demanded.

"It means Ah'm sick o' havin' ye boss me around!" Merida shouted, "Ah'm sick o' havin' ye tell me whit tae dae, whit tae say an' whit tae think! Ah want tae decide fer masel who Ah marry an' what Ah want tae dae wi' ma life! An' Ah want ye tae stay out o' it!"

"Ye stupid selfish little girl!" Elinor roared, causing Merida to take a step back in surprise while Fergus' eyes widened in shock, "Dae ye understand 'at this whole world does nae revolve around ye! Sometimes ye hae tae dae somethin' ye daenae want tae dae because it helps ither people! It canae always be about ye all th' time! Ye hae responsibilities an' expectations an' people wha rely on ye!"

"Ah daenae want responsibilities or any o' 'at stuff!" Merida ranted, throwing her hands up into the air, "Ah daenae want tae keep th' peace wi' ma own misery! Ah daenae want tae be shuffled off tae a culture Ah daenae know tae spend th' rest o' ma life wi' a man Ah daenae even like! An' most o' all Ah daenae want tae end up like a stuffy, controllin' noblewoman wha never actually did anythin' wi' her life like ye!"

Before anyone knew what had happened a loud slap echoed through the Great Hall as Merida stood with her head to the side, an angry red mark forming on her cheek. Slowly, she turned to look at Elinor, an expression of shock sprawled across her face. Elinor loomed above Merida, her arm posed in the air from the backswing of the slap. She glared at Merida, but as she looked at her daughter's expression changed from one of shock to one of hurt, a look of horror crossed her own.

"Merida, Ah-" she began before Merida burst into tears, turned and ran away, shouldering open the doors to the Great Hall and

disappearing into the village beyond.

"Merida, wait!" Fergus called, holding up his hand in a futile attempt to stop her but she was already gone. Fergus sighed as he lowered his arm while Elinor looked like she wanted to cry.

"Oh, whit hae Ah done?" she moaned, cradling her face in her hands as Fergus walked over and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Looks like ye hit her," Stoick commented. Fergus whirled around and glared at the Viking chief, who merely shrugged in reply.

"Shouldn't someone, you know, go after her?" Hiccup suggested.

"She's a stranger on a small island," Stoick replied, "She won't get far, and she has nowhere to go anyway. There's nothin' to worry about."

As he said that, the loud, low blare of a horn sounded over the village. Both Hiccup and Stoick's eyes went wide as another blast sounded over the village.

"Whit wus 'at?" Fergus asked.

"Something to worry about," Hiccup commented before gulping nervously.

"Whit is it?" Elinor asked nervously, "Dragons?"

As she asked, another horn gave three short blasts. It sound higher pitched than the first horn, and judging by the reactions on Fergus, Stoick and Hiccup's faces, it did not belong to the Vikings.

"Nae," Fergus whispered, his face pale with fear, "Vendal."

"Oh nae," Elinor whispered with fear, "Merida!"

"Ah hae tae go find her!" Fergus shouted as he made for the door.

"I'll go too," Stoick stated, "I have to help my village."

"Ma men wull aid ye," Fergus said, turning to look at Stoick.

"Alright," Stoick said with a nod, "Thank ye."

"There are bigger things here then ye an' me," Fergus replied, his face hardening.

"I guess this means our treaty is still on," Stoick observed.

"Ah guess it does," Fergus answered, before the sound of the Vendal horn echoed over the village again, "We'll hae tae discuss 'at later though."

"Aye," Stoick replied before turning to look at Hiccup, "Stay here with the queen."

"But I can help!" Hiccup exclaimed, despite his clear fear.

"No!" Stoick stated as he made his way to the door, Fergus at his side, "You stay here. Someone has to protect the queen."

With that, Stoick and Fergus left, slamming the door behind them. Silence fell over the Great Hall, broken only by the sound of fighting in the distance. Slowly, Elinor and Hiccup turned to look at each other, the queen raising a questioning eyebrow as Hiccup gave her an awkward smile and a shrug.

Meanwhile,

Merida ran through the village, heedless of her lack of knowledge of her surroundings or the heavy fog that had rolled in since she had last been outside. Tears flowed from her eyes, whipping into the air as she ran. Her throat was hot and scratchy from the combination of crying and running and she began to hack and cough as she stumbled to a stop. Falling to her knees, she cupped her face in her hands and began to weep. It was only then that the sounds of the world around her began to filter through her misery. The sound of fighting a short distance away was what made her raise her head in confusion, but it was the blast of a Vendal horn that made her gasp in fear.

Looking around, but unable to see anything in the thick fog, she was forced to rely on her ears to tell her about her surroundings. What caught her attention was the sound of something approaching. Something big. Checking her surroundings again, she just barely made out the shape of a stack of barrels against a building. Rushing over to it, she dove behind the stack just as the sound made it clear that whatever was in the fog was coming in her direction.

Curling up behind the stack of barrels, Merida did her best to remain absolutely silent as the noise grew closer. As it did, she could make out three separate sounds. First there was the booming noise of something large walking on the dirt path. Accompanying it was the sound of smaller footsteps accompanying it. She could also hear that whatever the smaller things were, they were panting like wild animals.

As Merida continued to listen, she felt relief wash over her as the sounds began to move past her. Just when she thought she was safe, the sound suddenly stopped. It was replaced by what sounded like giant nostrils sniffing at the air, followed by a pleased growl.

"Hold up, boys," a deep, rumbling voice said, "We have a guest."

Merida felt a cold chill run down her spine at the thought. She thought desperately of what to do as she heard the sound approaching her again. She was armed with only the arrows in her quiver and if she made a run for it, whatever was stalking her would surely notice her.

"Come on out," the voice said as the sound stop right on the other side of the stack of barrels, "I know you're there."

Merida squeezed her eyes closed, hoping that if she remained still and silent, whatever was behind her would think it was mistaken and

leave.

"Not coming out, huh?" the voice asked with a chuckle, "Fair enough. Now, how did that line go again? Oh, right."

Listening, Merida could hear whatever was behind her lean down and feel hot breath seep through the gaps between the barrels

Fi Fie Fo Fer, I smell the blood of a Highlander," the voice quoted as it gave a sniff for emphasis. Merida knew she should run, knew that whatever was behind her was going to try and kill her but she couldn't will herself to move, frozen in fear. What was worse was that she was certain she knew exactly who it was behind her.

"Be she alive or be she dead," the voice continued, the mention of her gender causing Merida to begin shaking uncontrollably, "I'll grind her bones to make my bread."

There was a pause where the only sound Merida could hear was her own heart hammering in her ears. Suddenly, the barrels seemed to explode behind her, causing Merida to scream in terror as a massive hand reached through the stack and snatched the back of her dress. It pulled her into the air, but the damage to her dress caused it to rip away and send her flying through the air and rolling across the dirt road, the rip along the back of her dress exposing her white underdress as she came to a stop on her stomach. As she pushed herself up, her eyes lifted to look at what, or who, had attacked her.

The first thing she noticed where the two men standing not too far away from her, glaring down at her. They had large and imposing physiques, over which they wore dirty and torn clothing that looked like it had been stitched together from rags and various animal hides. They both had scraggily dark brown hair, equally dark brown eyes and scraggily brown beards. They wore heavy fur cloaks made from black bear pelts, along with heavy linen wrappings around their arms and legs, their feet and hands otherwise remained uncovered, which were rough and dirty. Their exposed skin was painted black with war paint, and was further decorated with white painted symbols on their faces and arms. In their hands, they carried heavy clubs made out of bone and tipped with the claws of a bear.

What really drew her attention however was the massive man looming behind them. He easily stood twelve feet tall and was built like a mountain, with muscles upon muscles and a barrel chest. He had fair skin, and coarse black hair that covered most of the exposed flesh. He had pitch black beard that hung down to his chest, and was elaborately braided, with a dozen hollowed out human skulls threaded into his beard like beads. Most of his exposed skin was covered in scars and burns from countless battles. He wore the fur of a gigantic black bear draped over his shoulders and back, with the head hollowed out so that he could wear it like a hood, the snout sticking out past his face, its long teeth framing his features. One of his eyes was dark red in color, while the other was grey and glassed over, a long scar slicing through it. He wore tattered leather armor over a torn tunic and pair of pants that had seen better days. His feet were bare and calloused, topped with the same coarse, black hair. His hands were bigger than her head, dirty and calloused, while his nails had been apparently filed to points. A giant sword and axe hung from sheaths attached to his back.

"Well, well, well," the large man said, grinning at her, causing Merida to notice that his teeth had be filed to points as well, "What do we have here?"

The two smaller men moved towards Merida threateningly, but were stopped when the man held out on of his massive hands, signaling for them to stop.

"Now let's not be hasty, boys," the man chuckled, "We're in the presence of royalty after all."

Merida's eyes widen in surprise as she pushed herself up to her hands and knees.

"Surprised, cub?" the man asked, his grin growing larger, "I'd recognize the smell of your father anywhere. How is the Bear King these days? He handling that limp I gave him well?"

Merida said nothing as she pushed herself to her feet, eyeing the man wearily.

"You know who I am, don't you?" the man asked, his grin growing savage. Merida nodded in reply, unable to find her voice.

"Say my name, cub," the man stated, growing irritated at Merida's silence, "Say it!"

"Mor'du," Merida said, her voice only a little above a whisper.

The Demon Bear let out a loud laugh, his large grin showing off each of his pointed teeth.

A/N: As you may have guessed, things just took a turn for the worse, for our heroes. I hope you guys like my depiction of Mor'du, I wanted to make him a more interesting villain, so I hope I accomplished that! You'll be learning more about him in the future. Please review as feedback is always welcome!

5. The Eaters of the Dead

Chapter 5: The Eaters of the Dead

"So, cub, what brings you to this gods forsaken rock of an island?" Mor'du asked, leaning down so he could look Merida right in the eye, despite the fact that his blood red eyes were almost twice as big as her own.

"Ah cud ask ye th' same question," Merida stated, trying to sound brave as she took a step away from Mor'du.

"Well, you're a feisty one when you feel like talking!" Mor'du declared with an uproarious laugh, causing the men with him to chuckle as well, "I can see a lot of your father in you now."

"Ye didnae answer ma question," Merida said, taking another step back as she slowly reached for an arrow in her quiver.

"Why else would a known raider and cutthroat go anywhere?" Mor'du

questioned, "To pillage, rape and murder, of course."

Merida nervously slid an arrow out of her quiver and palmed it, holding the head between her middle and ring finger, hiding the shaft behind her arm.

"Now, that brings us back to what you're doing here," Mor'du stated, pointing one of his dirty and calloused fingers at her, his pointed nail aimed right between her eyes, "I can smell your kin all over this rock. So either I stepped into a warâ€¦|."

Merida looked him right in the eye, her icy blue gaze not wavering from his fiery red.

"Or you're all here to make some kind of alliance," Mor'du continued, studying Merida closely. Merida's eyes wavered, glancing briefly at the ground before looking back at the Demon Bear, causing him to grin evilly.

"An alliance, huh?" Mor'du surmised, chuckling as he did, "And you know what goes good with an alliance, don't you boys?"

The Vendal men chuckled in reply.

"Sounds like someone's getting married off," Mor'du commented, causing Merida to stiffen, "I bet you're excited, having a honeymoon up here in the cold wastes while looking forward to pushing out some Viking brats."

Merida said nothing as she continued to inch away from the giant.

"That's what I thought," Mor'du said with another chuckle as he reached up and drew his sword from the sheath on his back. It was twice the size of any sword she had ever seen, the blade scratched and dinged over almost its entire length, which was twice her height and made out of a polished, black stone that she realized was obsidian. The pommel was wrapped in black leather and runes were etched along the entire length of the blade in red. Pulling the sword out, Mor'du lowered his arm to the side, allowing the front of the blade to land on the ground with a thud, kicking up a small cloud of dust.

"Why don't I send your father your head as a gift to congratulate him on his alliance?" Mor'du asked, his wicked grin showing each and every one of his pointed teeth, "I think he'll like that, don't you?"

Merida said nothing as her fear froze her in place, her heart hammering in her chest as she watched the giant lift his massive sword effortlessly into the air and point it at her.

"I thought you'd agree," Mor'du stated simply, before lifting the sword above his head and swung it at her. Merida's eyes went wide before she ducked beneath the blade as it swung by, the blast of air following in its wake flipping her hair onto her face as she rolled out of the way. Quickly pushing herself to her feet, Merida managed to scramble away as Mor'du lifted his sword up to swing at her again. Merida dodged out of the way as Mor'du slammed it down where she had been standing a moment before, breaking a chunk of the ground and

sending a spider web of cracks across the surface while kicking up a small cloud of dust. The force of the blow forced Merida to stumble to her knees, sliding and ripping her dress even further.

"Stand still!" Mor'du barked as he pulled the sword out of the ground, dust and small rocks falling away from the tip, "This will only hurt for a second."

As the Demon Bear lifted his sword to swing again, Merida tried to get to her feet, but stumbled on the remains of her dress and stumbled again. She turned around and looked up with horror as Mor'du lifted his sword and prepared to thrust it into her. A second before he did, something slammed into the barbarian's shoulder, knocking him off balance and causing his thrust to go wide, slamming into the ground next to Merida with a loud thud and kicking up another cloud of dust.

Growling in irritation, Mor'du turned to look over his shoulder, finding a javelin sticking out of his back. Turning his eyes to follow the trajectory that the javelin would have flown in, Mor'du saw Andra standing a few yards away, still in the follow through of his throw with a pair of javelins clutched in his off hand. Boyd and William stood behind him, their weapons at the ready as well.

His eyes narrowing angrily, Mor'du reached up and grasped the javelin with his thumb and forefinger before yanking it out with a sharp tug, heedless of the blood slowly oozing from the wound. As the three boys watched in horror, Mor'du turned to face them, examining the javelin for a few moments as the Vandal men growled at the lordlings. Smirking, Mor'du turned his eyes towards the boys.

"I think you dropped this," Mor'du said to Andra, before flicking the javelin like a dart at the young man. Andra's eyes widened even further in surprise before he dove to the ground in order to avoid the attack while the two others dove to the sides. The javelin shot through the air at impossible speeds before slamming into the wall of a building, knocking a sizeable hole into the wooden structure. The boys glanced back at the damage in mute terror before turning their eyes back to Mor'du, who grinned wickedly at them.

"I'll deal with you lads after I've dealt with your princess here," Mor'du laughed before turning to face Merida, but instead found empty space where she had once been. Glancing up, his eyes narrowed in anger as he saw Merida making a hasty retreat, darting around a corner and out of view. Roaring angrily, Mor'du gave chase to the Highland princess, sparing only a moment to glance over his shoulder at his men.

"Kill them!" he ordered, before turning and lumbering around the corner that Merida had disappeared behind. Snarling, the two Vandal men turned and glared at the three lordlings before charging at them. Three young men quickly pulled themselves to their feet as they raised their weapons to face their enemy.

"Macintosh!" William yelled, brandishing his claymore high above his head.

"MacGuffin!" Andra shouted, tossing one of his javelin's into his free hand and holding them both at the ready.

"Dingwall!" Boyd added, banging his axe against his shield.

"Fer th' Highlands!" the three shouted in unison before charging forwards and meeting the snarling wildmen head on. As they reached the young men, one of the Vendals leapt into the air, raising his club to strike one of them. Boyd quickly jumped forward and brought his shield to bear, deflecting the man's attack while the Vandal's body slammed into the shield, knocking Boyd onto his back with the savage on top of him. As the Vandal tried to crawl over the shield to get at Boyd, the young Highlander pushed up on his shield, trying to keep his head away from the wildman's gnashing teeth and heavy club.

Seeing his friend struggle, Andra rushed over and kicked the Vandal in the side, the blow accompanied by the sound of cracking bone as the lordling's attack broke some of the savage's ribs. The force of the kick knocked the Vandal clear off of Boyd and sent the Wildman rolling a few feet before he came to a stop on his back, groaning in pain. Before the Vandal could back up, Andra ran over to the man, placed his foot against the savage's chest before driving his javelin through the barbarian's heart. The Vandal gasped in pain and shock, his mouth hung open in an expression of pain and shock as his blood oozed out of the wound. After a few moments, with Andra watching with wide, frightened eyes, the Vandal's eyes fluttered close and his body sagged, breathing no more. Andra gulped slightly, before bracing his foot and pulling his javelin free, the Vandal's blood dripping down the tip.

At the same time, William had met the other Vandal warrior head on. Blocking the man's wild swing with his claymore, he sifted his weight around before following up with a shoulder to the Vandal's chest, knocking the savage back. As the Vandal recovered, William rushed the man, his sword raised. As William swung at the Vandal, the savage tried to parry with his club. As the blade met the other weapon, it sliced through the wooden shaft, causing the head of the weapon to fall to the ground and rolled away. As the man pulled away, William used his momentum to spin around before driving his weapon into the Vandal's stomach. The savage wheezed in pain as blood splattered against William and his sword. After a few moments of struggling, the Vandal went limp, forcing William to place his foot against the man's chest before pushing him off, causing the wildman's body to fall to the ground.

William breathed heavily, trying to catch his breath, watching as the blood dripped off the tip. Looking up, he saw Andra helping Boyd to his feet before he looked up, his eyes meeting with William's.

"First blood, Andra?" William asked.

Andra nodded as Boyd brushed himself off.

"Mine too," William said, sparing a glance down at his sword, blood still dripping off of his sword, "but there's nae time tae think about 'at now. Merida needs our help."

Boyd and Andra both nodded, looks of determination on their faces.

"Well, we're wastin' time then, come on!" he ordered before turning

and running in the direction Merida and Mor'du had gone in. Boyd ran right after him, while Andra spared a moment to look at the man he had slain before following his friends.

Meanwhile,

"You can't run forever, cub!" Mor'du shouted as he pursued Merida around another bend, swing his sword at her as he did, missing her and lopping off a corner of the roof instead, sending tile and thatch flying around Merida, catching in her hair as she ran through it. Turning, she managed to dart around another corner just as Mor'du reached out and tried to grab her, missing her by inches.

As Mor'du roared in frustration behind her, Merida ran down the road in front of her, forced to jump over the body of a Viking woman lying dead in the street. As she ran past a house, she jumped to the side as a Viking man was tackled through the wooden door by a Vandal. Screaming in surprise, Merida did her best not to look back as she heard the man's cries of pain be swallowed by the Vandal's howls of fury and the sound of teeth digging into flesh.

Seeing Merida near the end of the road, Mor'du reached up and unslung his double-headed waraxe. It was a massive thing, comparable in size to his claymore and made of the same hardened obsidian with angry red runes written down the length of each of its curved edges. The shaft seemed to be made of bleached white bone belonging to some sort of massive creature, the grip wrapped in dirty, bloodstained linens.

Heaving the weapon above his head, he flung it down the street with a single arm, sending the axe flying end over end towards Merida. Hearing the massive weapon fly through the air towards her, Merida turned to see the axe hurtling towards her, her eyes widening in shock. Letting out a panicked scream, Merida dropped to the ground, causing the axe to go just miss her, the edge of one of the axe heads grazing her hair as it passed by. Sailing past the princess, the axe slammed into the side of a building behind Merida, utterly demolishing the wall and coming to rest within the confines of the structure, the walls and ceiling collapsing around it. Panting heavily, Merida looked with wide eyes at the destruction behind her, before turning back to look at Mor'du, who had recovered from the throw and was charging down the street towards her with murder in his blood red eyes.

Merida quickly pushed herself to her feet and made a mad dash around another corner and down a new street. As she did, a Vandal man came leaping out from an alley to her right, snarling and roaring like a wild animal as he raised his club above his head to strike her. Reacting on instinct, Merida lashed out with the arrow she still had clutched in her hand, striking the savage, driving the head of the arrow into the man's throat. Letting out a surprised, gurgling cough, the man stumbled as the pain overtook his motor skills and his momentum carried him to the ground. Merida didn't give him a second glance as she raced off down the street, leaving the dying man behind her while Mor'du came roaring around the bend after her, grabbing his axe and yanking it free of the collapsed structure as he went.

Desperately trying to find somewhere, anywhere she could go, Merida spotted what looked like a smithy at the end of the street.

Specifically, she saw a whole bundle of bows laying with other assorted weapons near the entrance to the smithy. Smiling with elation, she rushed over to the building as she felt Mor'du lumbering down the street after her, the Demon Bear's footsteps shaking the very earth beneath her.

Grabbing a bow that was sized for a person taller than her, Merida nonetheless spun around and slid to one knee, reaching for her quiver and knotting an arrow as she did. Her icy blue eyes narrowing, Merida pulled the bowstring back as far as she could, aiming at the giant charging down the street at her. Letting out the breath she hadn't even known she had taken, Merida released the arrow, sending it whistling through the air, right on its mark.

At least it would have been if Mor'du hadn't lashed out with reflexes that belayed his size, knocking the arrow clean out of the air with his sword and not even breaking stride as he charged her. Merida's eyes went wide with horror as she fell onto her back in a desperate scramble to try and get away. But Mor'du was already upon her, his sword raised in the air and a cry of fury and triumph on his tongue.

"MERIDA!" she heard a familiar voice shout as Mor'du brought his weapon down, only for the obsidian blade to be stopped by a smaller steel one a mere foot from Merida's head. Frozen in fear, Merida managed to dart her eyes to the side to see her father standing beside her, hands clasped firmly around the hilt of his claymore as he struggled to keep the Demon Bear's weapon away from her, sweat forming on his brow.

"Merida, move!" he shouted as he pushed on Mor'du's sword with a mighty cry, forcing the blade to the side and causing the Demon Bear to stumble before catching himself on the smithy. As Mor'du turned and snarled at her father, Merida managed to push herself to her feet and dash away, dropping her newly acquired bow as she ran.

"Merida, over here!" another familiar voice shouted drawing her attention to the three lords who were taking cover behind a building, her three brothers with them. Merida quickly changed her course and dashed over to where they were, leaping into the outstretched arms of Gerald MacGuffin, who grabbed her and spun her around behind the building, placing her with her brothers so that they were surround on all sides by either the lords or the wall.

"Merida!" Hammish shouted as the triplets quickly swarmed over her as she fell to her knees, panting from fear and exhaustion, "Are ye okay!?"

"Where's Ma!?" Hubert questioned. Before she could answer, their came a mighty roar accompanied by a cry of pain. Looking up and around the building, Merida saw her father go rolling across the ground, Mor'du snarling as he stomped after the Bear King.

"Sun above," Duff Macintosh whispered, "He's even bigger then Ah remember."

"We cannae leave th' king tae fight 'at monster alone!" Cameron Dingwall shouted, his pale face turning red with anger.

"We cannae leave th' king's children unguarded either!" Gerald yelled

back, his thick eyebrows knitting together.

"Then whit dae we dae?" Duff asked, a hint of fear in his voice.

Merida didn't seem to hear the conversation happening around her, her eyes glued on her father as he managed to pick himself up and turn to face Mor'du, his sword at the ready.

"It's been a long time, Fergus!" Mor'du taunted as he and the Bear King began to circle one another, "You look well! How's the leg treating you? I was just catching up with that pretty little daughter of yours. They grow up so fast!"

"Daenae ye talk abit ma daughter, ya damned beast!" Fergus roared as he charged Mor'du, swinging his sword at the massive man. Mor'du merely laughed as he parried the attack with ease before swinging his axe at Fergus' head. Fergus managed to duck the attack, but was caught off guard when Mor'du spun the axe slightly in his hand before catching Fergus with a backswing, hitting the Bear King with the side of the axehead and sending him sprawling.

"Da!" Merida cried in horror as she saw her father go tumbling across the ground, grunting in pain as he rolled to a stop.

"Come on now, Fergus," Mor'du said, raising his hands helplessly as Fergus pushed himself to his feet with a grunt, "We both know how this is going to end. You couldn't beat me before, and you're not going to now."

Fergus ignored him, raising his sword and pointing it at Mor'du.

"Here, I'll make it easy for you," Mor'du stated, flashing a savage grin at Fergus, "I'll cut your head off this time. It will be nice and quick, and that way you don't have to think about how you couldn't stop me from massacring your entire family!"

This was enough for Fergus, who let out a loud battle cry as he charged at Mor'du, the Demon Bear giving him a toothy grin in return. As Fergus reached him, he thrust his blade at Mor'du, who spun around it before slamming the butt of his sword's hilt against the back of Fergus' head, sending the man stumbling forward. As Fergus tried to catch himself, Mor'du spun around and kicked the Bear King in the back, sending Fergus falling to the ground.

"So much for the Bear King," Mor'du laughed as he lifted his axe above his head and stepped over Fergus while Merida watched on in horror. Just as Mor'du was about to bring the axe down, Stoick came rushing from around a corner before slamming his shoulder into Mor'du's back, sending the Demon Bear stumbling away.

"You know, I'm getting really tired of these last moment rescues!" Mor'du roared angrily as he turned to face Stoick as Fergus picked himself up again.

"That's too bad," Stoick replied as he pulled the double-bladed waraxe he had strapped to his back off and took it into his meaty hands, "Because I'm getting sick of ye bein' in my village!"

"Fine then," Mor'du growled as the two men moved to flank him, "I'll be more than happy to gut you both!"

With that, Mor'du let out a roar as he began swinging at both men with his axe and claymore. Fergus and Stoick fought valiantly against the Demon Bear, but even with their superior numbers, Merida could see that Mor'du outclassed them in every way. He seemed to know exactly where Stoick and Fergus were at any given moment, blocking and parrying their attacks without any effort at all while his blows hammered the leaders like sledgehammers, knocking them back or off balance with every swing. Roaring savagely, Mor'du swung his axe in a wide arc, hitting both Fergus and Stoick as they tried to block and knocking them down.

"I think it's about time weâ€¦thisâ€¦" Mor'du began, facing the two downed leaders with his weapons at the ready, but trailed off distractedly. He took a few experimental sniffs of the air before catching waft of something, taking a big sniff as his eyes went wide in surprise. Glancing around the surrounding village as if he was looking for something, a grin slowly began to spread across his features as he started chuckling to himself.

"Found you," Mor'du said to himself between his laughs.

"What's he doing?" Stoick asked as he pushed himself to his feet along with Fergus.

"Ah hae nae idea," Fergus admitted as Mor'du began laughing uproariously at a joke only he seemed to understand.

"Somethin' funny!?" Stoick demanded.

"Yes," Mor'du admitted as he calmed down, "But I'm afraid you wouldn't get it. Anyway, this has been fun, but I really must be going. Speaking of which, Fergus, if you and all of your men are here, who's watching your homes back in the Highlands?"

Fergus' eyes widened in realization and fear.

"Must be quite the skeleton crew," Mor'du commented as he sheathed his sword and slung his axe back over his shoulder while pulling a horn from around his neck, "You know, it's been so long since I've been there. I think it's time for another visit."

Before Fergus or Stoick could say anything, Mor'du brought the horn up to his mouth and gave three short blasts. Roars and howls of affirmation came from within the village as the mist seemed to thicken around them. Chuckling, Mor'du took a step back into the mist, seeming to melt into it.

"We'll have to save this for another time, Fergus," Mor'du mocked from the mists, "Tell that little cub of yours I hope I see her again soon!"

"Get back here, ye monster!" Fergus bellowed as he charged into the mist and began swinging his sword in every direction as Mor'du mocking laughter surrounded him on all sides. Then, just as quickly as it had appeared, the mist dissipated, leaving Fergus swinging at nothing but open air.

"What happened?" Stoick asked, "Where did he go?"

"Ah daenae know," Fegus growled, before he regarded Stoick with narrowed eyes, "But Ah know where he's goin'."

_A few minutes earlier, _

Up in the Great Hall, Elinor and Hiccup had managed to push one of the long tables up against the doors to block them. They both sighed as they sat down on one of the benches, Hiccup resting his back against the table behind it and rolling his head back while rubbing the back of his neck. As he did, Elinor glanced over at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Ah hae tae be honest wi' yeâ€¦Hiccup was it?" Elinor asked, earning a nod from the Viking teen, "Ye're nae whit Ah was expectin' when Ah heard Stoick th' Vast had a son."

"You're not the first," Hiccup replied with a chuckle, "And I doubt you'll be the lastâ€¦um, Your Highness."

"Ah take it ye get 'at sentiment often?" Elinor questioned.

"Basically every day of my life," Hiccup admitted, before a confused look crossed his face and he shot a questioning look at Elinor, "Why do you care, if you don't mind me asking? It's not like what people around here think of me affects you."

"If it affects ma daughter, then it affects me," Elinor replied simply.

"Well, if you don't mind me sayingâ€¦Your Highnessâ€¦it doesn't seem like you and your daughter reallyâ€¦get along," Hiccup observed nervously, not looking Elinor in the eye.

"Ye noticed 'at, did ye?" Elinor sighed with a little bit of dry humor in her voice.

"It was kind of hard to miss," Hiccup replied with a shrug, playing with his hands nervously, "Especially after youâ€¦wellâ€¦you know."

Elinor let out a longer sigh as she rested her elbows on her knees and buried her face in her hands.

"Ah cannae believe Ah did 'at," she mumbled into her hands.

"I take it that stuff like that doesn't happen often?" Hiccup questioned.

"Never," Elinor replied, looking up from her hands at Hiccup, "She jist made me soâ€¦so angry."

As she thought about the incident that had happened a short while ago, Elinor balled her hands in the fabric of her dress and her brown eyes narrowed.

"It's like she refused tae see any other point o' view except her own!" the queen fumed, "She's jist soâ€¦soâ€¦"

"Stubborn?" Hiccup provided, arching one of his eyebrows.

"Aye," Elinor agreed, sighing, "She's very stubborn. Very opinionated. Very muchâ€|"

"Like you?" Hiccup interjected, sucking in his breath as Elinor shot him an annoyed glance at him, "I meanâ€|that's just what I saw, but I could totally be wrong, I mean I just met you all today so I could be completely off base andâ€|"

Elinor held up her hand, stopping Hiccup's desperate attempt to retract his statement.

"'At's enough Hiccup, it's quite alright," Elinor said, lowering her hand as the young man clamped his mouth shut, "Ah shouldnae get mad at ye fer speakin' th' truth. Merida an' Ah are very similar in some ways, which is why we can butt heads sae fiercely."

Elinor's brown eyes turned sad as she looked down at the stone floor.

"Though never 'at fiercely before," Elinor added sadly.

"I'm sure she'll get over it," Hiccup reassured.

"Nae, she's too stubborn fer 'at," Elinor stated before a hint of fear entered her voice, as she nervously ran her hand through her hair "'At's if she hasnae already been torn apart by Vendals."

"I don't think so," Hiccup replied, trying to sound more confident than he really was, "I mean my dad and the others have fought these guys off a bunch of times, and with your husband and all those other burly Highlanders around those bear wannabes don't stand a chance."

Elinor smiled as the young man pumped his fist enthusiastically, appreciating his attempt to encourage her, even though he could see his own worries in his pale green eyes.

"Ye truly are unlike any Viking Ah have ever encountered or heard o', Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third," Elinor commented with a chuckle, "Dae ye mind if Ah ask ye a question?"

"Go ahead," Hiccup said.

"Whit dae ye feel abit all o' this?" she questioned.

"What? The Vandal attack?" Hiccup asked, confused.

"Nae, th' marriage," Elinor clarified.

"Oh," Hiccup replied, scratching the back of his head nervously, "I'm not really sure what to think about it, honestly."

"Why's 'at?" Elinor pressed.

"Well, I guess I've been conflicted about it," Hiccup admitted, surprised at how easy he was finding it to open up to a relative stranger, "I mean sure, part of me doesn't want to get married

against my will, who would really want that?"

"True enough," Elinor replied with a nod, which caused Hiccup to blink in confusion.

"Wait, I thought you were all for this arranged marriage kind of deal," Hiccup commented, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Ah am, 'at doesnae mean Ah daenae understand how tough it can be fer ye," Elinor explained, "After all, Fergus an' Ah's marriage was arranged, an' Ah can tell ye, Ah was shakin' like a leaf all th' way up tae th' alter."

The queen laughed softly at the memory as Hiccup chuckled appreciatively at her honesty.

"Ah turned out fine though, an' Ah ended up wi' a man Ah love more dearly than any ither in th' entire world," Elinor continued, "Ah know Ah'm lucky in 'at regard. Th' more important thing was 'at Ah knew it was my duty tae marry Fergus, fer th' betterment o' our people."

"I kind of feel the same way I guess," Hiccup stated with a shrug, "Sure I'm annoyed that this all happened without any sort of input from me, but it was still an opportunity to help my village. At least, help it without messing everything up."

"Whit dae ye mean?" Elinor questioned, eyeing Hiccup with a confused look as the young man's shoulders slumped and his eyes looked down at the floor.

"You know how my dad is called Stoick the Vast?" Hiccup asked, earning a nod from Elinor, "Well they have a name like that for me too. They call me Hiccup the Useless."

Elinor's eyes widened in surprise as a morose look passed over Hiccup's features.

"Ever since I was a kid, I've been nothing but a screw-up," Hiccup sighed, "I'm not built like the other people in the village. I'm not big, or strong, or anything like a Viking should be. I'm weak and clumsy and I pretty much can't do anything right. So, when this came along, this opportunity to help the village where all I was required to do was exist, well, you can say I didn't really feel like arguing about it much."

Elinor nodded numbly, her heart to her chest as she observed Hiccup with pity and sympathy.

"Ah truly doubt ye are useless, Hiccup," Elinor commented.

"I'm useless in every way that matters for a Viking," Hiccup replied, "I can't fight, I can't sail, I can't hunt dragons. Sure, I'm an alright blacksmith, no one's ever complained about anything I've made. At least anything they've told me to make."

He turned to look at Elinor and gave her a half-hearted smirk.

"So I'll take what I can get," Hiccup stated as he turned to look at the floor again, "At the same time, I didn't expect to be quite so

lucky."

"Lucky?" Elinor questioned, raising an eyebrow at Hiccup, "Whit dae ya mean lucky?"

Hiccup's eyes went wide at the question as he felt his face begin to heat up.

"Umâ€¦wellâ€¦you seeâ€¦it's just thatâ€¦M-Meridaâ€¦your daughter," Hiccup mumbled, moving his hands about in an effort to force the appropriate words out of his mouth.

"Aye," Elinor urged him on, a smile slowly spreading across her face.

"Wellâ€¦she's kind ofâ€¦you seeâ€¦that isâ€¦" Hiccup stumbled over his words as he felt his throat went dry.

"Daenae hurt yerself, lad," the queen cautioned with a chuckle. At her words, Hiccup took a deep breath to calm his nerves before turning to look back at Elinor, his shoulders straight and his hands clenched into fists.

"Meridaâ€¦is probably the prettiest girl I've ever seen," he said quickly, scared that if he didn't get it all out at once he wouldn't be able to get it out at all. Elinor's smile grew as she heard the words.

"At's wonderful, Hiccup," she assured him, causing the Viking teen to relax, "Ah'm glad ye think sae."

"And don't get me wrong, I'm not just into her looks or anything," Hiccup quickly added, "I know I only really met her today, but I get the feeling that behind all that anger and wellâ€¦murderous intentâ€¦there's someone I could really like."

"At's good," Elinor encouraged him, "Ah'm sure 'at Merida feels th' same way."

"After today, I'm not sure I agree with you, Your Highness," Hiccup sighed as he looked back to the floor. Elinor sighed as well, looking at Hiccup sympathetically.

"Ah know Merida saidâ€¦an' did some hurtful things today, but she was upset an' frightened. Ah'm sure if ye give her time tae calm down, an' try again, she'll see whit a good lad ye are," Elinor assured him.

"You think so?" Hiccup asked, a hopefully tone in his voice as he glanced up at Elinor.

"Aye, Ah do," Elinor replied, giving Hiccup an honest smile as she reached out and placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. As she did, there came a loud horn blast from outside.

"Whit was 'at?" Elinor asked nervously.

"That was the all clear," Hiccup explained, "Guess everything is okay now."

As he said that, the door into the Great Hall banged against the table they had pushed in front of it, as someone tried to get in. There was pause before someone pushed hard on the door, pushing the table back and allowing them entrance. A moment later, Fergus stepped inside, Stoick right behind him, with Merida, the triplets, the three lords and their sons trailing after.

"Ma!" one of the triplets shouted before they clambered over the table and threw themselves into her waiting arms.

"Oh boys, Ah'm sae glad ye're alright!" she exclaimed happily, hugging them close, before looking up to see Merida standing next to her father, "Merida! Are ye okay?"

Merida didn't reply to the question, shooting her mother a disdainful glare before turning away from her and taking a step behind Fergus. Elinor cast her eyes downward as a pang of guilt struck her heart while Hiccup winced sympathetically.

"Whit happened out there?" Elinor asked Fergus as he rounded the table.

"Vendal's attacked," Fergus explained, "Mor'du was among them. He tried tae kill Merida."

"Whit!?" Elinor exclaimed, standing to her feet and looking her husband in the eye, "Is she alright!?"

"She fine, a little roughed up an' spooked is all," Fergus explained, "There's blood on her, but it's nae her own."

"Ye think sheâ€|" Elinor began to ask, looking over at her daughter who had sat at one of the long tables, the three lordlings sitting with her and talking quietly with the princess.

"Ah dae," Fergus replied with a nod, "It was probably her or him but it's never easy, especially th' first time"

"Ah wud hope nae," Elinor replied nervously.

"But 'at's nae what's pressin' right now," Fergus stated, taking his wife's shoulders in his hands, "Mor'du knows 'at th' Highlands are partially undefended. Ah fear he's gone there tae attack."

"Then we hae tae get back as soon as possible!" Elinor exclaimed, her eyes wide with fear, "Whit are we waitin' fer!?"

"Well, there are some complications," Fergus said with a sigh.

"Complications?" Elinor asked, confused, "Whit complications?"

"Well, Merida an'â€|" Fergus trailed off, looking over at Hiccup, his face scrunched in thought.

"Hiccup," Elinor provided.

"Right," Fergus stated, surprised by his wife's response, "Merida an' Hiccup were supposed tae be wed before we left."

"We daenae hae time fer 'at!" Elinor exclaimed.

"Ah know, we hae tae leave, an' we daenae know when we'll be backâ€|saeâ€|" Fergus trailed off, having trouble finding the words he needed.

"Sae?" Elinor asked, urging him to finish.

"So yer daughter," Stoick spoke up, catching Elinor's eye as Merida looked up at the mention of herself, "is staying with us."

Elinor's eyes widened in surprise as her gaze drifted to where Merida was. As she saw her daughter, Elinor couldn't help but feel that if looks could kill, she would be dead where she stood.

A/N: So this one was a blast to write and as a result kind of got away from me. Still I'm sure you guys will like having the longest chapter yet. Please tell me what you think, and if you guys are still liking my depiction of Mor'du. Feedback and criticism is always welcome so please review! Later!

6. Dreaming of Home

Chapter 6: Dreaming of Home

The hustle and bustle down by the docks matched that of only a few hours earlier, though instead of unloading their longships, the Highlanders were quickly loading everything back onto the boats in their hasty preparation to return home. In fact, out of everything, there was only one thing actually being taken off any of the ships.

Merida watched from the shore, her arms crossed and her icy blue eyes fixed as she observed three men try to take a large horse off of the longship. The horse stood a head taller than any of the men, its frame rippling with tense muscle. It had a black coat except for the white around its nose along with a thick black mane and rings of white hair around his hooves.

The horse snorted and reared against the men's grasped, fighting to escape them. Seeing this, Merida narrowed her eyes as she walked briskly towards the men, the forest green dress she was wearing swishing around her feet. Marching up to the men, she unceremoniously shoved one them out of the way and snatched the reins from him.

"It's like ye blunderin' idiots hae ne'er handled a Clydesdale afore!" she shouted at the men as she shot them each angry glares, "He's nae jist some plowhorse ye can drag aroun!"

The men mumbled their apologies as they backed away from the horse, causing it to calm considerably. She soothed it further by shushing it as she stroked the horses head gently, looking right into the creature's large, brown eyes. The horse snorted and nuzzled Merida's face, causing a small smile to spread across her features.

"Come on, Angus," she said, leading the horse off the dock, his heavy hooves knocking against the wooden planks, which creaked under his

weight. Merida led the horse up the hill into the village, passing by the Viking villagers, who either shot her ugly looks or gawked in surprise at the size of her horse. Others didn't look at her at all, too busy repairing the damage from the raid, tending to the wounded or collecting the dead.

Merida looked away as two Viking men walked by, carrying the body of a third on a makeshift litter. Merida only dared steal a quick glance at the deceased Viking, but what she saw made her shudder as she noticed what looked like bite and claw marks covering the man. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, trying to banish the image from her mind as she continued up the hill.

As they approached one of the highest points of the village, not far from the Great Hall, a building came into view over the rise. It was a two story house much like the others in the village, though noticeably bigger. It was made up of large wooden logs, with a triangular, thatched roof. The foundation was square and made of hewn stone. A few windows dotted the walls, some round in shape, others square, each fitted with dirty glass.

Turning away from the building, Merida led Angus around the home to a small clearing on the other side of the house, separating it from the edge of the forest that dominated the rest of the island. In the clearing, a structure had been set up. It was a small, squat, wooden building with a slanted, thatch roof. The side facing her was completely open, the inside separated only by a latched, wooden gate. Jutting out to the side of the building was a shed with a single, wooden door.

Walking up to the door, Merida opened it, and beckoned Angus inside. The horse obediently entered, his heavy hooves thudding against the straw covered floor. Entering the building, Angus turned around and stuck his head out over the gate, making Merida happy that the horse had enough room to move around in his one pen stable.

"Welcome tae yer new home, Angus," Merida said as she reached up and removed the reins from Angus, the horse bowing his head down to make it easier for her, "They built it special, jist fer ye."

Angus seemed unconvinced by the sincerity in her voice and nudged her with his nose, causing Merida to smile and stroke it.

"Ah know," she said, "It's nae whit Ah want either."

Merida's eyes darkened as the smile fell away from her face.

"Seems like neither o' us hae much say in oor fates," she sighed. Seeing her downcast face, Angus snorted and nudged her face with his nose again, bringing her attention back to him.

"Sorry," she apologized, "Ah'm jist feelin' a wee bit worn out."

Merida flashed back to what couldn't have been more than an hour before, when she was screaming so loud she swore she could see the walls of the Great Hall reverberate from the force of her voice. Her mother had been strangely impassive during her tirade, keeping her eyes focused on her daughter but her lips remained shut, her only sign of distress being the way that she never let go of Fergus' arm,

squeezing it every time Merida threw a verbal barb the queen's way. Merida, however, ignored any sign of her mother's plight as hot tears poured from her burning eyes. Her tongue seemed to take on a mind of its own as it transformed her rage into audible form, spewing venom at any and all within the room but focusing on her mother in particular.

By the end of her outburst, everyone present knew that she hated her mother. That Merida wished she had never been born. That Merida felt that no one in the world had been cursed with a worse mother than her. Elinor seemed to wilt under the personal assault, any fire she had long having left her. By the end, it appeared as though the regal queen was on the verge of bursting into tears herself as the triplets clung to her dress, watching the events with wide, fearful eyes.

Fergus, for his part, had repeatedly tried to intervene, to calm his daughter and put an end to her verbal assault, as had the lords and even her friends. All pleas fell upon deaf ears, unable to reach her through the roaring fires of her fury and indignation. All requests for thought and reason were met with accusations of betrayal and declarations of rage, quickly cowing them all into silence.

Stoick remained impassive through the entire scene, all insults thrown his way, allegations of tyranny and barbarism met with a look of unconcern and disinterest. Any barrage of loathing towards him proved as ineffective as slinging pebbles at a watchtower.

Hiccup, for the most part, escaped her rant, hanging back by the tables, stealing occasional worried glances at Elinor. By the time Merida had finally remembered he was there, her fiery anger was little more than crackling embers. She glared at him for a few moments, her frost blue eyes scanning him with contempt. Not only was he a Viking, he was the poorest excuse for a Viking she had ever seen. His lanky, tiny figure combined with his performance in the arena had convinced her that she could easily take him in any sort of fight, be it with swords, axes or her own fists. He seemed to her to be utterly cowardly, hiding there in the Great Hall with her mother while his people bled and died outside. Nothing about him struck her as at all attractive, be it his looks, his personality or his skills. She had no doubt that if she were not being forced to marry him, no woman would want anything to do with him. Dozens of biting insults she could hurl his way went through her head, but ultimately she settled to merely spit on the ground in his general direction before shooting him a scowl so cold he took a step away from her in surprise.

For a long moment, the room was silent, no one daring to say anything as Merida fought to catch her breath. Then, without a word, Merida turned on her heel and stomped towards the door.

"Merida!" her father called after her, managing to find his voice again, "Where are you going!?"

"Out," she spat back, before slamming the large wooden door behind her for a second time that horrible day. The princess wandered aimlessly around the village for a while, numb from the intense emotions that had coursed through her such a short amount of time. Eventually, she found her way back to the docks and found a trunk of her things that had been unloaded from the ships. Opening it, she

pulled out one of her older dresses and put it on after tearing off the remains of the new blue one, covering her dirty white underdress. After that, she had noticed the men unloading Angus, which ultimately led her to where she was at that moment.

As Merida stroked the horse a few more times, the sound of her name floated up from the village. She sighed tiredly, not wanting to speak to anyone, but knowing one way or another she would have to.

"Ah'll talk tae ye later, Angus," she said before giving the horse a kiss on his large nose, "We'll gae riddin' real soon."

The horse snorted in reply as Merida turned and walked over to the shed. Opening it, she found it currently unequipped but that it was fixed with hooks from which she hung the reins. Closing the door behind her, Merida began to trudge down the hill towards the center of the village. After a few moments, one of her father's men came upon her, and after calling her name, wordlessly began to lead her back to the docks.

Arriving there, she found the four longships in the final stages of their preparation to cast off. Her family, along with the lords and their sons, stood on the docks, watching her approach. As she stopped in front of them, Fergus dismissed her escort before turning his eyes to his daughter.

"Ah see ye found Angus," Fergus commented hesitantly.

"Aye," Merida replied impassively, not meeting her father's gaze.

"We hae tae be shippin' aff now," her father continued awkwardly, scratching his chin, "We hae tae get back home as soon as possible."

"Ah suppose ye dae," Merida agreed, nodding her head slightly.

"It will be a while afore we can come back," Fergus told her, "Ah daenae know how long it will take tae ensure Mor'du isnae threatenin' th' Highlands anymore, an' then there are th' storms 'at come in th' summer an' th' frost nae long after 'at. All o' 'at put together meansâ€¦"

"Ah probably wonae see any o' ye until next year," Merida finished for him, her eyes widening in understanding as she met his gaze.

"Ah'm sorry, Merida," her father apologized, "Ah wish there was somethin' I cud dae."

Merida shrugged, turning her eyes away from him again.

"We dae hae somethin' 'at might help though," he said, looking over at some crates the men were bringing on shore. Glancing at them, Merida noticed holes poked into the crates and the sound of cooing and slapping wings emanating from within.

"Birds?" she asked in confusion, meeting his eyes again.

"Pigeons," her father corrected, "Messenger pigeons. Th' best we cud

get. They know th' way between here and home like ye know th' back o' yer hand."

Leaning down, Fergus gave his daughter a conspiratorial grin.

"An' there's one 'at knows its way down south, sae 'at ye can write tae 'at friend o' yours," he said in a low voice that caused her to smile.

"Thanks Da," she said, throwing her arms around his neck, causing him to laugh and pick her up, wrapping his powerful arms around her and squeezing her close.

"Ah'm goin' tae miss ye, Da," she whispered to him.

"Nae as much as Ah'm going tae miss ye," he replied, giving her another squeezing before setting her back down. As he did, William, Andra and Boyd made their way over to her side.

"See ye around, Yer Highness," William said chidingly, ruffling her hair with his hand before pulling her into a hug.

"See ye around, Yer Lordship," she replied as they pulled apart.

"If he does anythin' out o' line, anythin' at all," William said, glancing at Hiccup who stood at the end of the dock next to his father, "Ye send me th' word an' Ah'll bloody swim over here tae set him straight."

"Thanks, Will," Merida replied with a chuckle.

"Hey, 'at's whit friends are fer," he replied with a shrug as he took a step back, allowing Andra to walk up to her. A bemused smile crossed her face as she looked at the young man, almost twice her size, playing with his hands and looking like he was about to burst into tears at any moment. Reaching down, he scooped Merida up and squeezed her against his chest, her arms too long enough to wrap around his frame and instead were forced to dig into his sides in an effort to return as Andra blubbered something along the lines of how he was going to miss her.

"Ah'm goin' tae miss ye too, Andra," Merida replied, awkwardly patting the large boy's sides before he released her and quickly wiped his teary eyes. Smiling at him, Merida turned her attention to Boyd, who was looking at her with a level of focus that caught her by surprise.

"Sorry Ah didnae beat him, Merida," he apologized, rubbing his bandaged arm.

"Daenae worry abit it, Boyd," she replied as she pulled him into a hug, "Ye tried yer best. At's whit counts."

Pulling away, she was able to turn just in time to get tackled by her brothers, the triplets swarming over her as she landed on the dock in a seated position with a thud, the air knocked out of her lungs.

"We daenae want tae gae!" Hamish whined, burying his face into Merida's left shoulder.

"We want tae stay with ye!" Hubert added from the confines of her right side.

"We daenae trust them!" Harris finished, his arms wrapped around her midsection.

"Ah know boys, Ah know," Merida cooed as she scooped the triplets up and stood back on her feet, "But this isnae a place fer ye. Ah daenae think these Vikings cud handle th' likes o' ye."

"Ye say 'at like it's a bad thin'," Hamish stated with a hint of confusion, causing Merida to chuckle before she gave each of them a kiss on the forehead and set them down, urging them back to her parents side. The triplets scurried over behind their mother, whose brown eyes nervously met with Merida's blue.

"Mother," she stated coolly, pausing and staring dispassionately at her mother for a long enough moment to make the queen shift uncomfortably, "Hae a safe trip."

With that, Merida turned on her heel and walked away, not giving Elinor a second glance as the queen raised her arm to stop her, her mouth open to say something, but instead sighed sadly, letting her arm fall to her side as cast her eyes at the creaking boards beneath her feet.

"Ah've lost her, Fergus," she whispered loud enough that only he could hear, "Ah've completely lost ma baby girl."

"Jist give her time," Fergus said, wrapping his arm around his wife's shoulders and pulling her close, "Ye're her mother, she canae hate ye forever."

"We'll see," Elinor replied, clearly not believing him.

As Merida made her way down the dock, her eyes looking straight forward, her arms rigid at her side, Hiccup stepped up to her, holding his finger up to get her attention.

"Uh hey, Merida," he mumbled, "I know we kind of, you know, got off on the wrong footâ€|but I figure we could, I mean, I could possibly, if you'd likeâ€|"

"Nae," Merida replied simply, walking right past Hiccup without even a glance.

"â€|me to show you around the village," Hiccup finished weakly, his finger drooping as his face fell. Stoick rolled his eyes but offered no comment.

"Hiccup," he spoke up, catching his son's attention, "Keep an eye on her, I don't want her getting into any trouble on my watch."

"What?" Hiccup asked, looking up at Stoick in confusion, "Did you not see how she just-"

"Son," Stoick interrupted Hiccup, shooting him a stern glance, "Keep an eye on her."

"Right," Hiccup replied weakly, pointing in the direction that Merida

had gone, "I'll just goâ€|doâ€|that."

With that, Hiccup turned and jogged off in the direction Merida had gone in. Sighing and shaking his head, Stoick turned to where Fergus and Elinor were waiting for him, trudging over as the dock groaned under his weight.

"Well, this has been an interestin' day," Fergus stated with a sigh as Stoick stopped in front of him.

"I'll have to agree with ye on that," Stoick replied with a nod.

"Ye take care o' ma daughter, alright?" Fergus said seriously, pointing his finger at Stoick threateningly.

"I'll do what I can," Stoick replied, crossing arms, "But that girl may have more fire in her then any of us can handle. Especially my boy."

"Yer boy might just surprise you," Elinor interjected, giving Stoick a stern glance.

Stoick raised his eyebrow at the queen but said nothing.

"Safe voyage, Highlander," Stoick said, nodding to Fergus, who nodded back before the Viking chief turned and began making his way off the dock. Fergus gave his wife one last squeeze before turning and boarding their ship, the triplets trailing behind them.

As the four longships pulled away from the dock, Merida stood on one of the cliff sides within the village, where a path had been carved. She stood still as a statue, her eyes glued upon the quickly shrinking vessels, the banner of her homeland disappearing as they pulled further and further away. Hiccup stood where the path bent around the cliff, effectively hiding from the princess even though he was fairly certain she knew he was there. For a long time they stood like that, with Hiccup glancing uncertainly between Merida and the ground while the princess continued to gaze out at the sea long after the longships had disappeared over the horizon, which now burned with the rays of the setting sun.

"Is there someplace we hae tae be?" Merida asked suddenly, startling Hiccup so bad that he grabbed his chest in surprise.

"Um, I'm sorry, what?" he quickly mumbled.

"Is there someplace we hae tae be?" she repeated with an agitated edge, shooting Hiccup an annoyed glance.

"Um well, they'll probably be doing the funerals for the people thatâ€|you knowâ€|died today soon, and most people usually attend those," he explained, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

"Already?" she questioned, surprised, turning to face him fully.

"Um yeah, we usually don't wait long to set people to rest around here," he explained quickly, not looking her in the eye, "We usually don't have time to wait."

"Alright," Merida replied, flashing back to the dead body she had jumped over in the street while being chased by Mor'du and the Viking man she had seen being tackled through a door by a Vendal, "Then Ah suppose we should gae."

Hiccup nodded, looking down at the ground as the two stood in silence for a moment.

"Ah daenae know where we're goin', Hiccup," she spoke up, looking at him with a critical eye, "Ye'll hae tae lead me."

"Oh uh right!" Hiccup said with a surprised start, "Um follow me, I guess."

With that, Hiccup turned on his heel and began walking down the path, Merida following behind him. The two walked in awkward silence as they made their way further up the hill to the outskirts of the village. As they approached the edge of the woods, Merida could see that indeed most of the villagers had gathered. Between them and the woods, piles of wood and kindling were being set up, shaped into large squares. It took a moment for Merida to realize just what the piles of wood were. Pyres. They were going to burn the dead.

"Ye're nae goin' tae bury them?" Merida asked.

"Only the greatest of heroes get a barrow," Hiccup explained, shaking his head, "There's not enough room on this island to bury everyone."

Merida said nothing as she mulled over the fact, following Hiccup as he led them over to his father's side. Stoick stood at the front and center of the group, his arms crossed over his chest as he observed the building of the pyres. He glanced down as the two teenagers stopped at his side.

"Ah, Princess Merida," he greeted coldly, "Come to see how the Vikings treat their dead?"

"Ah felt Ah should pay ma respects," Merida replied, not looking at him, instead watching, as the Vikings brought out the deceased and began laying each of them on their own pyre, ten in all. Each of the bodies was terribly mangled in one way or another, and, to Merida's horror, the majority no longer possessed their heads.

"Whitâ€¦Whit happened tae their heads?" she whispered, aghast.

"Vendal took them," Stoick explained, "They always do if they can. Don't know why. Don't want to know why."

Merida gave an involuntary shiver before a thought occurred to her.

"Whit dae ye dae with th' Vendal bodies?" she asked, glancing up at the Viking chief.

"Nothin'," Stoick replied, "They're never here when the battle is over."

"Whit dae ye mean?" she asked in confusion.

"I mean the Vendal always take their fallen with them, without fail," Stoick explained, "I don't know why they do that either, before you ask."

Merida said nothing more as the bodies were finished being put upon their pyres. As the Vikings returned to the group, a short, old woman stepped forward. She was incredibly short, standing only about half of Merida's height, with a hunched posture. Her face was wrinkled and sagging, her pale blue eyes observing the world while flanking her crooked nose. She had long white hair that Merida guessed used to be blonde, held in matching braids that framed her face. She wore an iron helmet with curved horns upon her head while her body was covered in a brown, fur tunic, under which Merida could see a pair of orange leggings. She wore brown, fur-lined boots on her feet and fur sleeves on her lower arms. She carried a gnarled, wooden staff that was taller than her, decorated with trinkets and talismans and a simple stone pendant hung around her neck.

"Who's 'at?" Merida whispered to Hiccup.

"That's Gothi the Elder," Hiccup explained, "She's the village priestess. She's going to give the people their last rights."

As they spoke, Gothi came to a stop before the pyre at one end of the line, sighing as she leaned against her staff. After a moment, she held out her hand, in which a waiting Viking placed a burning torch. Gothi looked at the burning flame for a few moments before turning to the pyre in front of her.

"Let us pray," she said in a raspy voice that none the less appeared to command everyone's attention.

"_Lo there do I see my father,_" she chanted as she placed the torch against the pyre, the dry wood instantly catching fire, racing up to consume the fuel and the body with it.

"_Lo there do I see my mother,_" Gothi continued, setting the next pyre ablaze as she made her way down the line.

"_Lo there do I see my sisters, my brothers,_" Gothi pressed on, as Merida began noticing some of the other Vikings had begun chanting along with her.

"_Lo there I see the line of my people, back to the beginning,_" the chant continued as Gothi lit pyre after pyre, the light from the flames battling against the falling twilight. It was unmistakable that the other Vikings had joined in.

"_Lo, they do call to me,_" the chant continued as Gothi lit the last pyre before making her way back to the center of the group, the flames already licking at the bodies that lay upon the wooden structures.

"_They bid me take my place among them in the halls of Valhalla,_" the Vikings continued to chant, their heads bowed in respect as Merida looked around in a mixture of confusion and awe. Glancing to her side, she saw that even Hiccup was reciting the prayer along with his people.

"_Where the brave may live forever_," Gothi finished solemnly as a hush fell over the crowd. For a few long moments, no one said anything, all eyes upon the flickering pyres and the bodies of friends, family and loved ones slowly being reduced to ash. Then, without a word, the crowd began to break up, turning and heading back down to the village as the pyres burned to embers.

"Whit now?" Merida asked, her hostility momentarily forgotten. Hiccup blinked at her in surprise, apparently having momentarily forgotten she was there.

"Um, now there's usually some kind of feast in the Great Hall," he replied with a shrug, "That's what we usually do anyway."

Merida cringed at the idea, having heard stories of what Viking feasts were like.

"Guess this will be your first experience with Viking foods," Hiccup commented as they made their way to the Great Hall.

She had heard stories about that too.

"Wonderful," Merida sighed, "Ah can hardly wait."

Later,

Hours had passed and night had completely fallen outside, but from within the confines of the noisy Great Hall, Merida did not notice. She was surprised to admit that she was enjoying herself more than she had been expecting to. While the feast itself was every bit as rambunctious as she had been expecting, even if she hadn't seen anyone stab someone else yet, the food was much better than she had been prepared for, almost on par with what she was used to back home.

She was currently seated at the head table which sat at the back of the Hall, opposite the door leading inside and running perpendicular to the rest of the tables. Stoick sat at the middle of the table, with Hiccup to his right and Gothi to his left. Merida sat on Hiccup's right while to Gothi's left sat the black haired man she had seen with Stoick that morning when her family had first arrived. Sitting to the man's left was the boy she had seen earlier that day as well.

"Enjoying your food?" Hiccup questioned awkwardly, trying to start a conversation for the fifth time since they had sat. Merida sighed and decided to relent, the passing hours since her outburst, her family's departure and the funeral ceremony having extinguished whatever anger that had been boiling in her early. Despite her feelings of trepidation towards the Viking teen, some sort of conversation had to be better than the awkward silence they currently sat in.

"It's good," she replied, glancing at him briefly before focusing her attention on the leg of lamb she had been eating, "Better than Ah was expectin'. Certainly beats haggis."

"What's haggis?" Hiccup asked, shooting her a confused look as he took another bite of his meat.

"Stuffed sheep's stomach," Merida explained nonchalantly, causing

Hiccup to choke on his food in surprise and almost spit it out, earning a chuckle from the princess as she glanced at him. Pounding his fist against his chest to stop his choking, Hiccup up quickly took a swig of his drink, before rubbing the back of his neck and smiling embarrassedly, heat rising in his cheeks at the sight of her half smile and the quick sound of her laugh.

"Aye, 'at's how Ah feel abit it too," she joked, looking him right in the eyes, still smirking at him, causing his face to redden even more. They fell into silence again, though Merida couldn't help but notice it wasn't as awkward this time. Glancing down the table again, her curiosity got the better of her.

"Hiccup," she said, catching his attention, "Who are those two at th' other end o' th' table?"

"Oh," Hiccup replied as his face fell a little, "That's my uncle, Spiglout and my cousin, Snotlout."

"He yer father's brother?" she asked.

"No," Hiccup replied with a shake of his head as he stared at his food, playing with it but not eating, "My mother's."

"Oh," Merida said, noticing she had hit on what appeared to be a touchy subject, "Ah take it she's nae around anymore?"

"Hasn't been for a long time," Hiccup replied, answering the question that Merida tried to broach sensitively.

"Ah see," Merida replied, picking at her food as well "Ah'mâ€|sorry tae hear 'at."

"Thank you," Hiccup stated, looking at her and giving an awkward smile.

As the two continued eating, a cry suddenly went up from the crowd.

"A song!" a Viking man called, standing and almost falling over his seat, a flagon of mead sloshing in his hand, "Give us a song, Stoick!"

"I fear this day might be too solemn for song, my friend," Stoick replied, despite his chuckle of amusement.

"Too solemn?" the man questioned, "Your son has won himself a bride! Â€|how's it go? A wee bonnie princess at that! That's a feat worthy enough for song right there!"

Merida flushed angrily at the comment and glared at the man as Hiccup rubbed the back of his neck and looked down at his food, smiling awkwardly.

"Yeah, especially because I thought for sure that little Highlander was going to split his skull open with that axe!" another Viking declared, causing the whole hall to laugh uproariously. Glancing at Hiccup, Merida saw his smile fall and couldn't help but notice that the loudest laughter seemed to come from the end of the table where Snotlout sat.

"Still all the same, our new princess should bear witness to your songs," the first Viking continued, "Even if it has to be a solemn one."

Stoick chuckled again, and gave a nod.

"Very well then," he replied, earning a cry of praise as the Viking man sat back down. As silence fell over the crowd, Stoick's smile faded away as he readjusted himself in his seat. He took a deep breath, and then, to Merida, it seemed all the sound in the world stopped.

"_Far over the misty mountains cold_, " the chieftan sung with a voice so deep that Merida swore she could feel it reverberate in her chest, "_To dungeons deep, and caverns old_."

"_We must away, ere break of day_, " he sang, holding everyone, Merida included, in rapt attention, "_To claim our long-forgotten home._"

"_The pines were roaring on the height_, " Stoick continued, as Merida noticed that some of the Vikings had begun to hum along with him, the vibrations seeming to shake the entire building, "_The winds were moaning in the night._"

"_The fire was red, its flaming spread_, " Stoick sung as a few other Vikings joined in, creating a deep, solemn harmony, "_The trees like torches, blazed with light_."

"_The bells were ringing in the dale_, " Stoick words lifted into the air, mingling with other voices as more and more of the Vikings joined, "_And men looked up with faces pale._"

"_The dragon's ire more fierce than fire_, " Stoick continued and by now the whole hall had joined in, even Hiccup, "_Laid low their towers and houses frail_."

"_The castle smoked beneath the moon; the men, they heard the tramp of doom_, " the song continued as Merida focused on Hiccup's lighter and slightly nasal voice, causing the Viking teen to blush as he sung, "_They fled their hall to dying fall, beneath his feet, beneath the moon._"

"_Far over the misty mountain cold, to dungeons deep, and caverns old_, " the hall sang as one, their voices so loud now that Merida was sure the whole island and beyond could hear them, "_We must away, ere break of day, to seek our long-forgotten home_."

As the last note reverberated to the very stone foundation of the Great Hall, all the Vikings turned their eyes to their chieftain, who smiled and nodded at them. Merida watched with wide eyes, feeling a sense of kinship in the room that she couldn't quite explain.

"Well," Stoick said with a good natured chuckle, "I suppose that puts an end to this feast."

The other Vikings chuckled along with him as they nodded their heads in agreement. Slowly, the Vikings rose to their feet and began to

make their way out of the Hall. Stoick watched them for a moment before turning his attention to the two teens sitting to his right.

"Come on you two, that means us as well," he said, before his gaze focused on Merida, "When we get home, Hiccup will show you to the spare bedroom where you'll be spendin' yer nights until your parents' return."

Merida nodded without comment and the three rose from their seats and began to make their way out of the hall with everyone else. Merida stepped in besides Hiccup, a pensive look on her face as she followed the young man.

"Hiccup," she spoke up as they neared the door, catching the Viking teen's attention and causing him to blink in surprise, "Whit was 'at song ye were all singin' about?"

"Oh that one?" he questioned with a chuckle, "It's an old Viking song about the Red Death destroying the capital of the old Viking kingdom and scattering all the tribes. You'd find a variation in pretty much any Viking village you visited."

"Ah see," Merida replied, "Ah take it yer people miss those times."

"Wouldn't you?" Hiccup inquired, raising an eyebrow at her, "I mean, don't get me wrong, not even Gothi is old enough to have been alive when that kingdom still existed. It's kind of hard to miss something you never really knew. But still, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you miss it? Knowing there was a time when your people where better than they are now, when they were safer and at peace. Despite what they say, I think everyone wants peace, so I don't believe there's a Viking alive who doesn't miss those times."

"Even ye?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at him, causing him to smirk.

"Yeah, even me," he answered, before looking at his surroundings. He could see that his father had managed to get a good distance in front of them in the crowd, already outside while they were nearing the door. Just as they stepped through the door and began making their way towards his father, who was already heading for home, Hiccup felt someone jerk hard on his arm and pull him out of the crowd before shoving him back against the hard wooden wall.

Hiccup grunted as some of the air was knocked out of his lungs before he managed to get a bearing on where he was. He stood to the side of the door, the stream of people leaving the Great Hall slowly dwindling to his right. Looking before him, he saw Snotlout standing a few feet in front of him, rubbing a finger against his nose as he grinned satisfyingly at Hiccup.

"Hey cuz," Snotlout greeted with false friendliness, "Pretty big day, huh?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess so," Hiccup replied, rubbing one of his shoulders that was now sore from the impact against the wall. Scanning his surroundings, he saw that Snotlout was not alone. A bit to the side of the other boy stood Astrid, her arms crossed, looking at him with

half boredom and half contempt.

Next to Astrid stood another girl roughly the same age with fair skin, bleach blonde hair, blue eyes and a slim build. She wore a tan, leather vest over a blue tunic, along with dark brown leggings under a tan skirt. She had dark grey sleeves that covered her lower arms and wrapped around her middle fingers, along with a dark brown leather belt around her waist, dark grey, fur-lined boots on her feet and a dragon's tooth hanging from around her neck by a length of yarn. An iron helmet with two pairs of horns that stuck out to the side sat on her head, while her long, thick hair was woven into two braids that framed her face along with a pair of short pigtails that stuck out from the side of her head. Her angular face framed a savage grin she sent in Hiccup's direction.

On Snotlout's other side stood another boy who looked remarkably like the girl. He too had fair features, bleach blonde hair, blue eyes and a slim build. He wore a brown, fur vest over a light blue tunic along with grey leggings. He had a brown leather belt around his waist, a pair of brown, fur-lined boots on his feet, light brown wrappings around his lower arms and dragon's tooth hanging from a string around his neck. His long blonde hair hung loose around his face and an iron helmet with two pairs of horns sticking out to the side sat on his head. He wore a matching savage grin as he looked over Hiccup like a piece of meat.

Finally, hanging near the back, was another boy the same age as them. He had fair features, short straw blonde hair, blue eyes and hefty physique that made him almost twice the size of any of the other Viking teens. He wore a large, brown fur tunic that hung down to his knees along with dark green leggings and brown, fur-lined boots. An almost comically small iron helmet with two equally small curved horns sat on his head. He regarded the whole seen with an anxious gaze, appearing to anticipate something would go wrong at any moment.

"So how's it hanging?" Snotlout asked Hiccup, snapping him back to the moment at hand, "When are you going to introduce me to your new betrothed? I mean, we are family after all."

"Hiccup?" Merida called a bit behind Snotlout before Hiccup could say anything. Glancing over his shoulder, Snotlout grinned at Hiccup before turning around.

"Hey there!" he called out, catching Merida's attention, "He's right over here, we were just having a friendly chat."

Merida eyed Snotlout warily as she walked over to them. The Viking teen continued to grin at her as he stuck his hand out for her to shake.

"Snotlout Jorgenson," Snotlout introduced himself as Merida hesitantly shook his hand, the tone of his voice putting her on edge "I'm Hiccup's cousin. Great to have you joining the family."

"Thank ye," Merida replied warily, quickly pulling her hand back, "Hiccup told me abit ye durin' th' feast."

"Did he now?" Snotlout asked before turning to Hiccup and playfully hitting Hiccup on the arm causing the other young man to wince, "You

scamp, talking about me behind my back!"

"Yeah, you know me," Hiccup laughed awkwardly as he moved to go, "Anyway, me and Merida need to be getting back to my house so we can get her all situated, so if you don't mindâ€¦"

Hiccup moved to walk away but was stopped when Snotlout violently shoved him in the chest causing Hiccup to slam against the wall of the Great Hall.

"What's the hurry, cuz?" Snotlout asked him with a hint of venom in his voice, "The house isn't going anywhere."

"I suppose you're right about that," Hiccup gasped, coughing from the air being knocked out of his lungs.

"Why don't you introduce the pretty lady to everyone?" Snotlout suggested, before turning to look at Merida, his eyes roaming her up and down, "And my, she is very pretty up close, isn't she?"

"Um, yeah," Hiccup replied as he pushed himself away from the wall, his eyes darting to Merida who took a hesitant step away from Snotlout, "I'll do that."

"Merida," Hiccup said, catching her attention, "These are some of the guys from around the village. These are the twins, Ruffnut and Tuffnut Thorston."

"Hey," the boy, Tuffnut, greeted Merida, nodding and grinning wickedly at her.

"How you doing?" the girl, Ruffnut, added with a matching nod and grin.

"And back there is uh, Fishlegs Ingerman," Hiccup continued, indicating towards the large boy. Merida noticed something below the awkwardness the two regarded each other with, but couldn't make out what it meant.

"And last, but not least, we have-" he began but was cut off as Astrid stepped right up to Merida, looking dead into Merida's eyes with an intensity that surprised and confused her.

"Astrid," the other girl practically growled, "Astrid Hofferson."

"It's uh good tae meet ye all," Merida said, taking a step away from Astrid, "It's nice tae um meet Hiccup's friends."

Astrid snorted in contempt as Snotlout and the twins let out a chuckle.

"We're not his friends," Snotlout stated with another chuckle.

"Thenâ€¦then whit are ye?" Merida asked in confusion.

"We're what this village is supposed to have," Snotlout explained, "Strong, traditional, future dragon slaying Vikings. Not like this useless runt."

As he said that, Snotlout reached out and wrapped his arm around Hiccup's neck and put him into a hold, grinding the knuckle of his other hand onto the young man's skull.

"And not like you either, princess," Astrid hissed, pulling Merida's attention away from Hiccup's struggling, as she took another step towards the redhead, forcing Merida to take another step back, "Don't think that just because you're here that makes you one of us. You're an outsider, someone who would be our enemy if our leaders didn't have bigger things to worry about than you stupid Highlanders."

"Whit's yer problem!?" Merida demanded as she felt her anger rising in her stomach.

"You're my problem!" Astrid shouted back at her, getting right in Merida's face, causing the princess to take another surprised step backwards, almost tripping over her own feet. As Merida stumbled Astrid reached out and grabbed Merida's arm hard, causing the other girl to hiss in pain.

"Let gae o' me!" Merida exclaimed, trying to pull away from Astrid's iron grip.

"It would have been better if you had just killed the runt," Astrid growled, ignoring Merida's pleas, "Then we could have executed you like we should have, and killed your entire stupid family while we were at it. That way we wouldn't have to worry about your kind ever again!"

"Shut up!" Merida shouted, her hands clenching into fists as she shook with rage.

"Or what you spoiled brat!?" Astrid yelled back at her. At that moment, Merida felt any semblance of control she had wash away as she threw a punch at Astrid, striking the other girl across the chin. Everyone's eyes widened in surprise as Astrid stumbled back a step, rubbing her jaw in shock, before turning and glaring at Merida. Before the other girl could react, Astrid rushed her, grabbing the princess by the throat and slamming her against the wall of the Great Hall. Merida coughed in surprise before she brought both hands up and wrapped them around Astrid's wrist, trying to pull the other girl away as she felt the Viking's grip tighten around her windpipe.

"Whoa, Astrid, don't you think that's a little harsh?" Ruffnut asked, a concerned look on her face.

"Shut up!" Astrid spat back at the other girl before turning to glare at Merida, who was beginning to turn blue.

"What's goin' on here!?" a voice shouted, before they all turned to see Gobber hobbling over towards them, "Whit th' Hel dae ye think ye're all doin'!?"

"Crap!" Snotlout shouted as he released his hold on Hiccup, causing the smaller boy to fall to the ground as Astrid reluctantly released her hold on Merida's throat, causing the other girl to slide to the ground, coughing and gasping for air.

"Let's get out of here!" Tuffnut declared as he and the other quickly made to run away before Gobber reached them.

"Another time, princess," Astrid growled, sparing Merida one last glare before running off with the others. Hiccup was picking himself up just as Gobber reached him.

"Hiccup, are ye alright?" he asked, looking at the boy with concern.

"Yeah, don't worry about me," Hiccup replied, waving the man off before turning his attention to Merida, who was picking herself up off the ground, holding out a hand to help her up "Merida, are you-

"Leave me alone!" she shouted, slapping his hand away as she thrust herself to her feet and took off running into the night.

"Merida!" Hiccup shouted, running after her into the darkness, "Merida wait!"

"Hiccup, hold on a second!" Gobber called after the boy as he hobbled after him.

Merida rushed through the darkened village, ignoring Hiccup calling her name behind her even though she had no idea where she was running to. Eventually, she reached the village outskirts by running uphill and burst into the forest, dodging around trees as the brush grabbed at the hem of her dress. Ultimately, she came to a stop at a cliff edge, falling to her knees as her lungs burned. It was then that the tears came anew as she gave into her sorrow, sobs wracking her body as she held her face in her hands.

After a few minutes of crying, Merida slowly lifted her face from her hands, observing her surroundings with tear filled eyes. The cliff over looked the churning sea, black and formless beneath the night sky. A full moon hung over head, casting everything in a pale light as the stars danced around it in the sky. Slowly, Merida's eyes fell to the horizon, to the west where her home lay across the mighty sea, and she was filled with the desire to leap into the sea and swim all the miles between here and there. But she knew she couldn't. She was trapped there, on the rocky island of Berk, and she felt completely, utterly alone.

"_Ah hear th' mountain birds, th' sound o' rivers singin'_, " she sung quietly to herself, "_A song Ah've often heard._"

"_It flows through me now, sae clear an' sae loud_, " she sung louder, the melodic beauty of her voice clashing with sorrow of her song, "_Ah stand where Ah am_."

"_An' forever, Ah'm dreamin' o' home_, " she continued, her words carried through the forest by the ocean breeze, "_Ah feel sae alone, Ah'm dreamin' o' home_."

"_It's carried in th' air, th' breeze o' early mornin'_, " her words echoed through the forest, catching Hiccup's attention as he frantically searched for her, causing him to pause in confusion as he listened, "_Ah see th' land sae fair._"

"_Ma heart opens wide, there's sadness inside,_" her song flowed through the woods, prompting Hiccup to follow it, "_Ah stand where Ah am_."

"_An' forever, Ah'm dreamin' o' home,_" Merida continued to sing, standing up and facing the ocean, unaware of Hiccup standing at the edge of the forest behind her, watching and listening in rapt attention, "_Ah feel sae alone, Ah'm dreamin' o' home_."

"_This is nae foreign sky, Ah see nae foreign light,_" she sung, her voice echoing almost across the entire island, causing some of the villagers to look around in confusion, "_But far away Ah am, from some peaceful land._"

"_Ah'm longin' tae stand, a hand in ma hand,_" Merida sang loudly, tears falling from her eyes as Hiccup leaned against a tree, watching her, "_An' forever, Ah'm dreamin' o' home,_" _Ah feel sae alone_."

"_Forever Ah'm dreamin' o' home,_" Merida's voice trailed off as she reached up and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Hiccup," she spoke up after a few moments, causing the young man to jump to attention in surprise.

"Uh yeah?" Hiccup asked nervously.

"Can ye take me back tae yer house?" she asked, turning to look at him, her icy blue eyes almost glowing in the moonlight in a way that took Hiccup's breath away, "Ah'd like tae gae tae bed."

"Um, right, sure," Hiccup replied, before beckoning her to follow him, the two making their way silently through the forest back to the village.

Unbeknownst to them, another had heard the song, perched upon a higher cliffside. It was a reptilian creature of large size, dwarfing even a horse. It had sleek, black scales that blended perfectly, spiked ridges along the side of its head and down its back and a form that resembled a salamander, with large ear-like appendages on either side of its wide face. It fluttered its large, bat-like wings as it observed the two teenagers with yellowish-green eyes with black irises.

As the creature watched them leave, its ears pricked up as a soft sound, almost like a child murmuring, came from nearby. Turning, the creature saw a tiny, spectral creature floating a few feet away from it. The specter was light blue color and made out of some sort of formless mist that glowed in the darkness. It had a vaguely humanoid form, with a head, torso, and two spindly arms that trailed off into wisps of vapor. It regarded the creature with two pinprick eyes.

The creature sniffed the specter suspiciously before it vanished with another murmur, causing the creature to sniff in surprise. It darted its eyes around in confusion, before spreading its wings and taking off into the sky, disappearing into the inky blackness.

Meanwhile, alone figure stood on the edge of the forest, observing the creature as it disappeared into the night before glancing towards

where Merida and Hiccup had walked off in. After a moment, there came another murmur as the specter appeared over the figure's shoulder. Chuckling, the figure pat the specter on the head with a gnarled hand before turning and walking deeper into the forest.

"Come along dearie," the figure said with a raspy, feminine voice, "Zhere's much vork to be done."

A/N: Alternate title: the Musical Chapter! Well, that one was a doozy, to say the least. I was originally going to split this into two chapters, but figured I'd rather get it all out in one go. Hope you guys appreciate it! Well, all the pieces are set, so the story is in full swing now! However, what happens next might not be what you expect! For those who are wondering, the Viking song is "Misty Mountains Cold" (with a little bit of rearranging) from the Hobbit, and Merida's song "Dreaming of Home/Hyme des Fraternises" from Joyeaux Noel. While neither of those songs are in either of these movies I felt they fit really, really well and wanted to use them. I hope you guys liked this chapter! As always, critiques are welcome so please review! Later!

7. Broken

Chapter 7: Broken

Merida, dressed in her dark blue dress, sighed as she sat upon Angus' back, looking down at the island of Berk stretching out below her. Her bow was looped around her shoulders, she finally having gotten around to recovering it after that first horrible day on Berk, thankful that no one had taken it from the arena floor. The horse and rider currently stood on one of the island's highest, rocky cliffs, the forest, valleys and crags all visible to her. It had been weeks since she had first arrived on the island and she had done little other than explore the land. Not that it was truly by choice, the Vikings had given her nothing to do in the village and seemed to prefer that she be in the area as little as possible, an unspoken request she was more than happy to oblige. It's not like she really wanted to do any work for the Vikings anyway, though she'd be lying if she said that the work done at the smithy didn't interest her to some degree.

Merida was happy to be out of the village also because it meant she didn't have to be around the Vikings. Stoick seemed to resent the fact she was there at all, almost as if Merida staying in his home hadn't been his idea in the first place. Stoick's attitude towards Merida was practically welcoming however in comparison to the outright hostility she received from the teenagers, especially Astrid, who seemed to loathe her entire existence. Merida had to admit though that Hiccup seemed to be interested in getting to know her. Or at least, he made it seem like he was, as Merida was fairly certain he was just putting on a show for her, that he had a somewhat better grasp of diplomacy than his father and new that playing nice with her would be better for both of their peoples, even though it made him seem two-faced to her.

Merida sighed again as she looked over the wilderness that covered most of the island which she had been exploring for the majority of her time there. Merida was shocked to discover that the island's forests and cliffs were actually quite beautiful in spite of how the

island looked on the outside. The forest was made of towering trees, mostly of spruces and other evergreens that had adapted to the bitterly cold northern winters. The flora was rounded out by ferns and mosses that covered the forest floor. A few small lakes and ponds made from collected rainfall and thawed snow dotted the landscape, rolling down the hills and cliffs to form streams and even small rivers that cut across the forest on their way back into the ocean, pouring over the steep sides of the island in frankly beautiful waterfalls. Dominating the forest were numerous species of birds and small creatures such as squirrels, mice and rabbits, their numbers strong thanks to the lack of any natural predators existing on the island save for eagles, owls and the Vikings themselves.

The cliffs, while lacking in the life that dominated the forests, were still rather breathtaking, the erosion of the sea, the rivers and the weather creating rock formations that were a sight to behold. Also, from the cliffs Merida could see the rocks and small islands that surrounded Berk almost like a protective ring. Some were sharp rocks jutting out of the sea like teeth, while others were leaning towers of stone that stood almost as tall as Berk itself. She even caught sight of some massive stones that created arches over the crashing waves.

Merida and Angus currently stood on one of the highest points of the island, near the center where the continually rising land reached its point. Merida and Angus had worked their way up the rising earth that surrounded the cliff throughout the afternoon and were currently taking a break, Angus deciding to graze a little on the coarse grass that grew through the hard earth. The horse seemed to have been enjoying his time exploring the island with Merida, though Berk was slightly too confined for him to go galloping across the countryside, which probably explained why he seemed to be the only horse on the island.

Glancing to the west, Merida saw that the sun was beginning to set beneath the horizon, the blue of the sky transforming into purples and oranges, the light of the stars beginning to poke through in the east. Sighing, she turned her eyes back in the direction of the village, realizing it had come time to head back so she and Angus wouldn't be stumbling around in the dark.

"Come on," Merida said, catching Angus' attention, "It's time tae head back."

The horse snorted as he turned and began clomping down the steep hill to the side of the cliff before trotting through the forest. As the horse and rider reluctantly made their way through the woods, twilight fell over the island, the stars and the moon shining while the last light from the sun faded as they reached the outskirts of the village, close to Stoick, Hiccup and, she supposed, her home.

As Merida slid from Angus' back and began to lead him over to his stable, a screeching sound cut through the night and straight to her heart. Her icy blue eyes went wide as she whipped her head towards the center of the village, her red hair flying wildly around her as she did. A warning horn sounded from one of the watch towers and she saw beacons being lit and raised into the night sky. Her blood ran cold as she hoped against hope that this wasn't what she thought it was.

"DRAGONS!" someone called from village as monstrous screams cut through the air and fire began raining from the sky.

"Angus!" she cried, whirling around to face the horse, who stared at her with wide, fearful brown eyes, "Ye have tae get out o' th' village! Back intae th' forest, it will be safer fer ye there!"

The horse shook his head roughly, clearly afraid but not willing to leave the princesses side.

"Ah'm nae arguin' with ye Angus!" Merida shouted before running to the horse's other side and slapped his rear end, urging the horse to bolt back into the woods. Angus took the time to glance back at Merida as he ran, seeing her urging him on.

"Gae!" Merida screamed as the horse disappeared into the dark woods, "GAE!"

As she did, there suddenly came a loud thud from behind her and she felt the earth shake slightly beneath her feet. Merida froze in place, swallowing loudly as she heard something moving behind her. Slowly, Merida turned around, dreading what she would find. Standing behind her was clearly a dragon standing roughly twice her height and possessing at least four times her mass. It was mostly light blue in color, its scales glistening in the moonlight, while those on its belly faded into white. She noticed that it had a bird-like physique, with two backward jointed legs and folded wings at its side, its long tail balancing out its large head. Its head was mostly dominated by its large, lizard-like snout, the mouth filled with curved, razor sharp teeth that stuck out past its lips. Its large nostrils sniffed at the air as it glanced around with yellow and black, eyes with slit pupils that flanked its snout. From the end of its snout grew a long horn that curved back towards its head while a frill of yellow spikes grew from the base of its skull. A row of yellow spines grew down its back, while its blue and yellow striped tail was completely covered in them. Its wings were bat-like, the membrane colored yellow while the boney structures were blue. On each wing, a small, finger-like, yellow claw grew from the lower joint. Four yellow claws grew from its feet, spread out along each foot to keep the dragon's balance, while a similarly color spur grew from the back of each foot.

Merida had only seen a few dragons in her life, the mighty beasts seemingly disliking the Highlands. She recalled one attacking Castle Dunbroch when she was younger, and had seen a handful flying over the castle. She even encountered a couple while exploring the wilderness around her home, though it was always either from afar or she snuck away before the dragon caught wind of her. Her mother taught her about them as part of her studies, and her father always came back with stories when he was called away to help protect a part of the kingdom from a particularly vicious one or group of dragons. So as the beast eyed her, its head cocked to the side to study her, Merida knew exactly what it was the stood before her.

"Nadder," Merida whispered to herself, almost as if she had to tell herself the answer. As she said that, the Nadder roared at her, as if her saying its name enraged it. Merida screamed in fright as the Nadder lunged at her, forcing her to roll out of the way. Rolling to her feet, Merida quickly unslung her bow from her shoulders and drew an arrow. She spun around to face the Nadder, notching the arrow and pulling it back, aiming it right at the dragon.

The Nadder hissed as it turned to face Merida again. As it did, the Nadder opened its massive mouth wide, a glow appearing in the back of its throat. Merida's eyes widened in surprise as she realized what the Nadder was doing. As the fire grew in the Nadder's throat, Merida loosed her arrow, sending it flying right into the Nadder's gaping maw, the missile imbedding itself into the top of the dragon's mouth. The Nadder screeched in pain as it lifted its head up, shooting fire into the night sky.

Merida quickly notched another arrow, backing away from the Nadder and watching in fear and awe as the flames cut off. Turning back to Merida, the Nadder hissed angrily at her, flicking its tongue against the arrow in its mouth, snapping the shaft and sending it flipping through the air in a shower of blood and saliva before it came rolling to a stop at Merida's feet. Merida looked at it in surprise before aiming her bow at the Nadder again. The Nadder screeched at her in response and whipped its tale at her, sending a shower of spines flying at her. Letting out a yelp of surprise, Merida dove to the ground, avoiding the spines that impacted the ground around her.

Taking advantage of Merida being forced to the ground, the Nadder rushed at her, its jaw wide and its wings spread threateningly. Merida gasped in surprise as she tried to scramble to her feet but couldn't get away before the Nadder raised one of its clawed feet to slash her open. Before it could though, something tackled into the now unbalanced Nadder, sending the dragon tumbling to the ground. The Nadder screeched in surprise and pain as it rolled across the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust and debris as it flapped its wings angrily.

As the Nadder tried to right itself, Merida looked to her savior, finding Stoick looming over her, his eyes trained on the Nadder before glancing at her.

"On yer feet, girl," he ordered, causing Merida to push herself to her feet, and dust herself off as the Nadder managed to pick itself up as well.

"Get to the smithy," Stoick told Merida as the Viking chief turned to face the Nadder which hissed at him angrily, "You'll be safer there."

"Whit?" Merida asked in confusion, "How will Ah be safer there?"

"It's where I keep my son, isn't it!?" he asked hurriedly as the Nadder began to charge at him, "Now go!"

Grunting in frustration, Merida turned around and slung her bow back over her shoulders as she ran while the Nadder slammed into Stoick, who dug his feet in a met the charge head on, wrapping his arms around the dragon's snout and beginning to wrestling with it, being careful to not gore himself on the beast's horn.

As Stoick fought with the Nadder, Merida ran down the hill towards the village's center. Everyone was out, either fighting with the swooping dragons or trying to douse the flames that sought to consume buildings throughout the village. As she ran through the chaotic

streets, she saw Snotlout, Astrid and their group of friends helping put out a fire on the roof of one of the houses. Turning away, she dodged out of the way of a man fighting with smaller dragon before ducking around another corner, bringing the smithy into sight.

Running up to the door, Merida flung herself against it, slamming the door open and sending the princess stumbling into the smithy, loudly knocking over a couple of weapons before catching herself on a wooden chest.

"Merida?" she heard Hiccup say, causing her to turn to look around the room. It was set up much like the smithy that was in the castle back home. In one corner sat a bench that seemed to be a desk used for designing, covered in scratch of parchment and charcoal pencils. In another corner sat a pair of workbenches covered in tools and clamps. The furnace and billows occupied a third corner, the coals burning hotly within the metal confines while the fourth corner had a large window that opened to the outside, a desk strewn with weapons in front of it while a few racks of weapons hung from the wall on either side. At the center of the room sat a black anvil next to a large bucket of water. Hiccup stood at the anvil, working on a sword, an apron on over his clothes, his vest hanging on a peg on the wall. Nearby, Gobber stood at the bench by the window. They both wore matching surprised expressions as Merida picked herself up and brushed off her dress.

"Whit?" she asked irritably, eyeing them both with an annoyed expression, "Ye act like ye've ne'er seen me afore."

"No! No, it's not that," Hiccup replied hurriedly, dropping the hammer he had been holding and the sword he was working on before holding them up defensively, "It's just that I've never seen you, you know, in here before."

"Aye," Gobber agreed, as he handed a passing Viking a battleaxe, "Certainly didnae expect ye tae come flyin' intae ma shop like 'at. Most people knock, ye know."

"Well, in case ye haenae noticed, there's a dragon attack happenin' outside!" Merida exclaimed, quickly slamming the door closed, "Sae Ah was in a bit o' a hurry."

"That's right, there hasnae been a dragon attack since ye came here, has there?" Gobber stated with a nod.

"Are you okay?" Hiccup asked, concern written on his face.

"Aye, Ah'm fine," Merida replied dismissively, looking around the shop, "Ah ran intae a Nadder near yeâ€|the house. Yer da's takin' care o' it."

"Wait, you ran into a Nadder?" Hiccup asked, "Did it attack you?"

"O' course, it's a dragon isnae it?" Merida replied, shooting a confused and slightly irritated glance at him.

"How did you get away?" Hiccup questioned.

"Ah fought it aff until yer da showed up," Merida replied offhandedly.

"You fought off a Nadder!?" Hiccup exclaimed, surprised while Gobber looked at her with an impressed expression.

"Aye, shot it in th' mouth when it tried tae breathe fire at me," Merida said with a shrug, "Nae big deal really. It almost got me with those spines o' its, but yer da showed up an' started fighting it. Guess Ah owe him."

"You shot a Nadder in the mouth!?" Hiccup questioned, shocked while Gobber let out an impressed whistle.

"Ah got tae say, lass, 'at's pretty impressive fer someone without any dragon trainin'," Gobber stated.

"Thanks, Ah guess," Merida replied with another shrug as she continued to look around the smithy. Hiccup brushed a hand through his hair as Gobber chuckled while shaking his head incredulously.

"Well, looks like they might be leavin'," Gobber stated as he looked out of the window up at the sky as the screeching of dragons, shouts of Vikings and the clashing of metal against scales began to fade.

"Already?" Merida asked, confused, causing Gobber and Hiccup to shoot her confused looks of their own, "Nae 'at Ah'm complainin' or anythin', just surprised. Figured these attacks lasted longer."

"Nae usually," Gobber replied, "Th' point o' these attacks is tae raid our food supplies an' livestock. The dragons we actually end up fightin' are providin' cover fer th' others. Once th' raid is done, th' others make a break fer it themselves. Ah'm surprised though, Ah haenae heard anythin' about th'â€¦"

Gobber trailed off as his ears pricked up. Listening as well, Merida could hear what sounded like a high-pitched whistle, sounding similar to wind being sucked through a narrow hole. His eyes widening in surprise, Gobber looked up, his jaw going slack in shock before whirling around to look at Merida and Hiccup, who looked at him with a mixture of confusion and worry.

"Doon!" Gobber shouted, turning fully from the window, "Get doon!"

Gobber's warning was followed by the sound of something whistling through the air at high speeds. Gobber quickly dove to the ground as Hiccup spun around and grabbed Merida by the shoulders before pulling her down to the ground with him on top of her. A split second later, something slammed into the ground as there was a flash of purplish light and a blast of heat from outside the smithy accompanied by a deafening boom. After a moment, there was silence as smoke began to pour into the smithy from outside.

"Hiccup," Merida stated, looking up at the smithy's ceiling with an irritated expression as Hiccup lay on her.

"Yeah?" Hiccup asked.

"Ah think ye can get aff me now," she said, a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"Right!" Hiccup said quickly, springing up to his knees and holding his hands up and away from her, a blush completely covering his face, "Right, sorry."

"Whit was 'at?" Merida asked, picking herself up and brushing herself off.

"'At was a Night Fury," Gobber replied, grabbing the sill of the large window and pulling himself to his feet.

"Whit's a Night Fury?" Merida asked, as she moved over to the window, sucking in her breath as she looked outside. The building across the street from the smithy had been completely demolished, transformed into a smoking crater surrounded by rubble. The road before them had been scorched by intense heat and leaning out of the window, Merida could see that the walls of the smithy had been blackened as well. Flames burnt here and there amongst the destruction and the stench of sulfur filled the air.

"Be happy ya didnae know afore," Gobber replied as he reached up and closed the window, "Because th' Night Fury is th' fiercest dragon ye cud ever fear tae face this side o' th' Red Death."

Merida nodded, still in shock after witnessing such devastation.

"Ye two should probably be headin' back home," Gobber instructed them, "Th' worst is over, nothin' but cleanup tae dae."

"Do you think they could use my help?" Hiccup asked as he took off his apron and hung it up on a peg.

"Er nae Hiccup, th' work 'at needs doin' requires heavy liftin' 'at ye're nae really," Gobber paused as quickly looked Hiccup over, "equipped fer. Better tae show th' lady home an' be here bright an' early tomorrow. Ah'm sure there are plenty o' things 'at are goin' tae need fixin'."

"Okay," Hiccup sighed with disappointment as he pulled his vest off its peg and put it on, "Good night Gobber."

"Good night Hiccup," Gobber replied with a small smile before turning his eyes to Merida, "An' a good night tae ye too, princess."

"And tae ye as well, um, Godder," Merida stated, caught off guard by Gobber's friendliness.

"It's Gobber," Hiccup whispered to Merida as he walked over to her side.

"Och, right Gobber," Merida quickly corrected as she and Hiccup exited the smithy, "Sorry about 'at."

With that, Merida and Hiccup left the smithy, the two teens making their way up the hill towards the house. They were awkwardly silent for a few minutes, the only sound between them being the crunching of their feet against the dirt road.

"Thanks, Ah guess," Merida spoke up suddenly, startling Hiccup.

"Sure, don't mention it," Hiccup replied, smirking and waving his hand dismissively at her, before a look of confusion crossed his face as he looked at her, "Thanks for what?"

"Fer correctin' me back there," Merida explained, not meeting Hiccup's gaze, "An' Ah guess fer knockin' me tae th' ground when th' Night Fury attacked.

"Oh yeah," Hiccup said, blushing and scratching the back of his neck in embarrassment, "Like I said, don't mention it."

The two teens walked in silence for a few moments before Merida spoke up again.

"Sae why were ye in th' smithy?" she asked, glancing at him and raising a questioning eyebrow.

"I kind of work there," Hiccup answered with a shrug.

"Work there?" Merida questioned, confused.

"Um yeah," Hiccup replied, scratching the back of his neck again, "I'm kind of Gobber's apprentice."

"Why is th' son o' th' village chief workin' as a blacksmith's apprentice?" Merida inquired, the confused look still on her face.

"It's one of the few things that I'm actually somewhat adequate at," Hiccup admitted with a sigh, "Plus it keeps me out of trouble, like my dad wants."

"'At's basically whit yer father said when he told me tae gae there earlier," Merida stated.

"Yeah, he would say something like that, wouldn't he?" Hiccup griped, sighing again.

"Ye seemed tae be doin' an okay job," Merida stated, glancing at him again, causing Hiccup to look at her with a raised eyebrow, to which she responded with a shrug as she looked at the ground.

"Gobber's a pretty good teacher," Hiccup explained.

"If ye say sae," Merida stated, the slight tone in her voice making it sound like she disagreed.

As the two neared the house, Merida happened to glance at the stable behind the house, happy to see it intact before realization struck her.

"Oh nae, Angus!" she exclaimed, a panicked look crossing her face.

"The horse?" Hiccup asked in confusion, startled again by Merida suddenly speaking up, "What about him?"

"When th' dragon attack started, Ah forced him tae run intae th' woods where he wud be safe," Merida explained as she turned to Hiccup, "Ah hae tae gae find him tae make sure he's nae hurt."

"I'm sure he's fine," Hiccup tried to reassure her, "He's the biggest animal on this island when the dragons aren't around and you made the right call, they don't really ever seem to go into the woods, not enough room for them."

"Still, Ah hae tae gae find him," Merida said as she began to rush towards the forest, Hiccup running after her, trying to keep up with the fleet-footed princess.

"I'll come too," Hiccup huffed behind her.

"If ye insist," Merida sighed, slowing down to allow Hiccup to catch up with her, "We'll cover more ground if we split up."

"Er, right," Hiccup replied, "What should I do if find him?"

"Jist start leadin' him back while callin' ma name," Merida answered, "He cudnae hae gone far."

With that, Merida veered off to the left in her search for Angus, causing Hiccup to sigh as she disappeared into the brush.

"You know," he said to himself sarcastically, "I'm starting to get the feeling that she's trying to avoid me."

As Hiccup began his search for the horse, Merida scanned the dark woods for Angus.

"Angus!" she called, trying to get the Clydesdale's attention, "Angus, where are ye!?"

"Well, well, well," a voice said from behind her, causing Merida to spin around in surprise as Astrid emerged from the shadows, "Look who's wandering around the woods in the middle of the night."

Meanwhile,

As Hiccup wandered around the forest, he happened upon a clearing, dominated by a peaceful glade. A whole garden's worth of flowers grew there, colored midnight blue, their stems seemingly pointed to the moon hanging over head. As Hiccup scanned the glade, he managed to make out the large shape of Angus in the pale moonlight.

"Angus!" he called as he jogged over to the horse, causing its ears to prick up and its head to lift to look in Hiccup's direction, "There you are."

Stopping next to the horse as it turned to face him, Hiccup took the time to marvel at just how big Angus really was compared to him, towering over the Viking as the Clydesdale observed him with its brown eyes.

"Hey there big fella," Hiccup greeted, suddenly very nervous, "Merida's been looking for you."

Angus seemed to recognize the name as he leaned forward and began to sniff Hiccup with his large nose.

"Hey, easy there, big guy," Hiccup said cautiously, "I'm just trying to help. Please don't like eat me or whatever it is that horses do to people they don't like."

Angus sniffed Hiccup for a few more moments before whinny quietly and nuzzling the teen with his snout.

"Well, I guess that means you like me," Hiccup stated with relief, reaching out and patting Angus on the head, "Now come on, I'm sure Merida will be even more happy to see you."

Noticing the reins hanging from Angus, Hiccup slowly reached out and took them into his hand, smiling when the horse offered no resistance. Hiccup turned to begin leading Angus out of the glade and back towards the village, but stopped as the dark blue flowers caught his eye again.

"Girls like flowers, right?" Hiccup asked Angus, shooting a questioning glance at the horse, "Do you think Merida would like these?"

Angus' snort offered very little in reply.

"Well, you're no help," Hiccup sighed, a smirk on his face as he playfully rolled his eyes at the horse while turning back to the flowers. Leaning down, he picked one of them before bringing it back up to his face for a closer examination.

"Yeah, I think she'll like these," Hiccup stated before he went about picking more of the flowers, a smile on his face, "I think I'll need all the help I can find to get on her good side."

Meanwhile,

"Whit dae ye want, Astrid?" Merida asked cautiously, taking a step away from the Viking girl.

"Just wanted to chat," Astrid replied with a shrug, "You've been doing a pretty good job of avoiding me since the last time we got to talk."

"'At's because th' last time we talked ye tried tae choke me," Merida pointed out, her icy blue eyes narrowing in anger.

"Actually, I was choking you," Astrid said darkly, all sense of false cordiality dropping from her face, "And I would have done a lot worse to you if Gobber hadn't shown up."

"Whit is yer problem with me?" Merida demanded, her anger boiling over, "Whit did Ah ever dae tae ye?"

"It's not what you did personally," Astrid explained, her blue eyes narrowing, "It's what your people did."

"An' whit, pray tell, did ma people dae?" Merida questioned.

"They killed my father," Astrid growled, taking a step towards Merida.

"Whit?" Merida asked, surprised.

"You know all those Vikings your people fought in our war? The ones they were so happy to kill?" Astrid questioned angrily, "One of them was my father!"

"Am Ah supposed tae be sorry fer 'at?" Merida asked, a look of disgust growing on her face, "Last time Ah checked, it was th' Vikings who started 'at war by invading th' Highlands. We were defendin' our homes from ye savages!"

"We had a famine that year!" Astrid shouted back, "Our people were literally starving to death!"

"Sae 'at makes it okay tae steal from us!?" Merida yelled, her hands clenched into fists, "'At makes it okay tae pillage our land, kill our people an' take whit was rightfully ours!? Ah bet whoever killed yer father was stoppin' him from committin' some heinous crime, like murderin' a child or rapin' a woman. Ah'm sure yer mother wud hae been proud if he came home tae tell ye 'at story!"

"You shut your damned mouth!" Astrid screamed as she suddenly reached for her belt and pulled out a knife, the blade flashing in the moonlight. Merida unslung her bow just as quickly, notching an arrow and pointing it at the other girl before she could take another step towards her.

"Stay back!" Merida threatened, the bowstring taut in her fingers.

"I remember you're pretty good with that bow," Astrid observed, indicating to the weapon with the blade of her knife, "Almost killed that worthless betrothed of yours with it that first day you were here. If I was far away, you'd have me dead to rights."

Astrid suddenly lashed out, grabbing the bow with her free hand and yanking it to the side, causing the arrow to fly wide as Merida released it, the missile burying itself in a nearby tree.

"Too bad I'm not far away," Astrid sneered before kneeling Merida in the stomach, wrenching the bow from the princesses grasp as the Highlander doubled over in pain. Reaching down, Astrid grabbed a handful of Merida's hair before yanking on it and tossing the other girl to the side, sending the redhead rolling through the brush.

"This is a nice bow," Astrid commented as she looked over the weapon, holding it in both hands and running her thumbs over the wood before turning her dark blue eyes back to Merida, "I'm guessing your father gave this to you."

Merida said nothing as she pushed herself to her hands and knees, watching helplessly as Astrid looked her directly in the eyes. Astrid's eyes bore into Merida's for a moment, before she lifted her knee up and quickly brought the bow down on it, snapping it cleanly in half with a loud crack.

"Oops," Astrid said dispassionately before tossing the remains of the weapon right in front of Merida. The princess stared at the broken bow, its two halves held together by the drawstring, for a few long moments, a look of anguish on her face. Slowly, her sorrow gave way to hate, angry tears welling up in her eyes as her hands balled up into fists in the coarse grass and her whole body shook with rage. She whipped her head up to glare at Astrid, who smirked back at her.

"Sorry about that," Astrid mocked as her smirk grew into a sneer. Screaming in fury, Merida jumped to her feet and leapt at Astrid, catching the other girl off guard and tackling her to the ground. The two teenage girls rolled through the brush, each trying to roll on top, Astrid dropping her knife in the struggle. Merida managed to plant herself on top of Astrid, smacking the other girl in the face a few times and splitting her lip before the Viking girl managed to grab hold of her arms and roll Merida off of her.

As Merida picked herself up, she had just enough time to look up before Astrid speared into her, lifting the princess off her feet before slamming her hard onto the ground, knocking all of the air out of the Highlander's lungs. As Merida recovered, Astrid stood up before kicking the redhead hard in the side, causing Merida to cry out in pain. While Astrid pulled her leg back to kick her again, Merida grabbed onto it, pulling the blonde off balance and knocking her to the ground again.

Astrid tried to push herself up, but Merida leapt on her again, pinning the Viking to the ground and grabbing the sides of her head. Astrid tried to push Merida off, placing her hands on the princess' face and shoving against her. Merida struggled against Astrid and began digging her fingers into the other girl's face, earning a cry of pain from the blonde. Grabbing firmly onto Merida's head Astrid yanked it to the side, pulling the Highlander off of her and sending her rolling across the ground.

As Merida recovered, Astrid pushed herself to her feet, spotting her knife as she did. She quickly picked it up, turning her attention to Merida as the other girl began picking herself up as well. Letting out a rage filled cry, Astrid rushed at Merida, who looked at the enraged teen with fear as she tried to scramble away.

Before Astrid could get to Merida, there came a monstrous scream as Angus came bursting into view, slamming into the stunned Viking and knocking her to the ground, the knife tumbling out of her grip. Astrid screamed as Angus reared back, rolling out of the way as the horse brought his massive hooves onto the ground where she had been laying a moment before.

"What the Hel's going on here!?" Hiccup shouted as he came running into view, a bouquet of flowers clutched in his hand, glancing first at Merida, who laid on the ground, fear still in her eyes and then at Astrid who stood nearby, blood beginning to ooze from the cuts on her face, "Astrid, what in Odin's name are you doing!?"

"What am I doing!?" Astrid demanded, "What the Hel are you doing, Hiccup!? Why are you defending this Highland trash!?"

"Why are you trying to kill her!?" Hiccup yelled back with more

bravado then he knew he possessed.

"Are you kidding me!?" Astrid asked incredulously, "After everything her people did to us!? After she tried to kill you!? You're actually sticking up for her!? What's wrong with you!?"

Before Hiccup could say anything, Astrid glanced at what he was holding in his hands, before letting out a disbelieving laugh.

"Really? You picked flowers for her?" Astrid questioned, snatching the flowers out of his hands before he could do anything, "Do you actually like her or something?"

Hiccup sputtered and mumbled, caught off guard and unable to come up with a response, causing Astrid to snort in contempt.

"Gods, you're pathetic," Astrid stated, tossing the flowers right in Hiccup's face, causing the young man to flail at them in surprise as she rolled her eyes at him, "You're in an arranged marriage, you're marrying her regardless of what happens and yet you're throwing yourself at her. How desperate are you?"

Hiccup said nothing as Astrid scoffed again, turning and beginning to walk away.

"You know what? I've wasted enough time with you losers. I'm going home," she said before pausing a few feet away from Merida, who was still sitting on the ground, "Have fun rutting around with Hiccup the Useless, princess. Maybe you'll get lucky and you can add impotence to his list of failures."

Astrid turned to go, but held up a finger as if she remembered something she forgot and turned to look at Merida again.

"Before I forget," she stated, before pulling in her bottom lip, sucking on it and then spitting a blood filled loogie into Merida's face, "Thanks for the split lip."

Merida screeched in fury as she scrambled to her feet, trying to chase after Astrid as the other girl began to walk calmly back towards the village. Before she could get at the Viking girl however, Hiccup stepped between the two.

"Merida, stop!" Hiccup shouted, reaching up and barely catching Merida on the shoulders before she barreled into him.

"Get oot o' ma way!" Merida demanded, glaring at Astrid as she tried to claw past Hiccup, the other girl glancing over her shoulder and shooting Merida a smug smile.

"No, you have to stop!" Hiccup argued, barely holding onto the enraged princess, "All of this fighting isn't helping anyone!"

"Gods, whit kind of Viking are ye!?" Merida demanded, pushing Hiccup away from her.

"What happened?" Hiccup asked, ignoring her question and trying desperately to help, but Merida wasn't having any of it.

"Jist leave me alone!" Merida screamed at him, scooping up the remains of her bow and shoving past Hiccup, almost knocking him to the ground as she ran into the woods in the direction of the house. Hiccup looked in the direction she had gone with an utterly helpless expression before grabbing hold of Angus' reins and leading the horse behind him as he made his way home.

By the time Hiccup got there, Merida had already disappeared inside. Hiccup quickly led Angus into his stable, taking of his saddle and reins before rushing inside through the back door. He raced through the simple kitchen and through the living area before bounding up the stairs to the second floor. He found himself in a simple hallway, making his way past the doors leading into his father's and his rooms and coming to a stop before the entrance to what had become Merida's bedroom, the wooden door firmly shut before him. Hesitantly, he lifted his hand up and knocked on the door.

"Gae away!" Merida's muffled voice demanded from the other side of the door.

"I'm sorry, Merida," he said, "I don't really understand what happened to you back there with Astrid but I just want to help."

"Then help me by gaein' away!" Merida shouted back at him.

"Just open the door, Merida!" Hiccup shouted, surprising himself, "I just want to talk to you!"

Hiccup heard the stamping of feet before the door was thrown open and Merida stood before him, her blue eyes rimmed red from crying.

"Well, did it ever occur tae ye 'at maybe Ah daenae want tae talk tae ye!?" she screeched at him, leaning so close to his face that Hiccup was forced to take a step back, "Did it ever cross 'at thick Viking head o' yers 'at Ah daenae want a damned thing tae dae with ye!? Ye'd think 'at shootin' arras at someone wud send 'at message, but ye didnae really pick up on 'at one, did ye, Hiccup!?"

"I-Iâ€¦" Hiccup mumbled, to caught by surprise to put an entire sentence together.

"Why daenae ye dae us both a favor an' drop th' act, it's nae foolin' anyone," she growled, "Ye must really think Ah'm stupid if ye think Ah daenae see whit ye're daein'. But Ah dae, Hiccup, Ah see whit ye're daein', tryin' tae act all nice an' friendly sae this whole stupid marriage thing can gae along smoothly. Oh, fer sure, it's real noble o' ye, tryin' tae encourage peace like 'at, but all it's really doin' is makin' ye look like a damned bloody idiot! Sae jist stop it, because deep down, Ah know ye're exactly like every other Viking on this damned island! Sae let's jist be honest with each other from now on. Ah know ye hate me Hiccup, ye and yer entire stinking tribe. Well, guess whit? Ah hate ye too!"

With that, she slammed the door in the stunned Hiccup's face, never even allowing him to say another word to her. Hiccup stood their shocked for a few moments, before he seemed to recover and his expression was replaced with one of sadness. Sighing, he lightly hit

his head against the wooden door, looking gloomily at his feet.

"Iâ€¦I don't hate you," he whispered, finally finding his voice, but unable to raise it loud enough for her to hear.

Slowly, Hiccup backed away from the door. As he did, he felt something brush against his hand against something. Glancing down, he saw that one of the blue flowers had clung to the fur of his vest. Pulling it out, Hiccup looked at it for a few moments before his expression turned to one of frustration as he balled his hand into a fist, crushing the flower before throwing it against the wall, the petals bursting off of it and floating to the floor. Hiccup watched them for a moment before turning and running into his room, slamming the door behind him and flinging himself face-first onto his bed, falling into a fitful sleep as the sounds of Merida's sobbing echoed from the room next door.

A/N: Interesting chapter to write here. I've had this scene stuck in my head for a while now so it felt good to finally get to write it all down. Hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. As always critiques and feedback is always welcome so please review! Later!

8. Enough

****Chapter 8: Enough****

A grey, overcast sky hung over the island of Berk, the clouds churning and fat with rain. A cold breeze blew over the Viking settlement, chilling the inhabitants on the early spring day. This was the day that greeted Hiccup as he groggily opened his green eyes, the weak grey light coming in through his window, more darkening his room with shadow than illuminating it. Sighing, the young Viking sat up in his bed, looking out the window for a few long moments, his thoughts matching gloomy nature of the weather.

Moving so his feet hung off the side of the bed, Hiccup's mind shifted to the memories of last night. Finding Astrid and Merida fighting. Astrid mocking him. Merida screaming at him. The damned flower. The young man sighed again, running a hand through his auburn hair. This isn't how he had wanted things to go at all, but as usual, it seemed like it didn't matter what he wanted.

Remembering that he had somewhere to be, Hiccup pushed himself to his feet. Looking down at himself, he realized that he had slept in his clothes, boots and all. Unable to work up neither the energy nor the desire to change his clothing, Hiccup shrugged his shoulders before making his way out of his room, practically dragging his feet as he did.

Glancing to the side as his bedroom door closed behind him, Hiccup noticed that Merida's door hung open. He heard no signs of movement inside, so he guessed that the princess had already gotten up before fleeing to the woods. It would be pure luck if he saw her at all that day. Perhaps that was for the best.

Slowly, Hiccup's eyes panned down to the floor, seeing where the petals from the flower had floated to ground the night before, noticing that they had hardly been disturbed from where he had last

seen them. He felt a wave of melancholy wash over him as he turned away from the wilted petals before trudging down the stairs and out the door, making his way down the hill towards the center of the village, and more specifically, Gobber's smithy.

Hiccup made his way quietly through the village, making his way past the other men and women going about their morning rituals. Nobody bothered him as he walked his usual route almost mindlessly, his thoughts replaying the night's events over and over again. He shook his head as he turned a corner and the smithy came into sight. Today was a new day. Sure, it had started kind of crummy but that had just been holdover from the night before. Today was going to be a better day.

"Hey cuz!" Snotlout's grating voice floated in from behind him, "Heard you had a rough night!"

Or perhaps it was going to be even worse.

"What do you want, Snotlout?" Hiccup asked grumpily as he glanced over his shoulder, seeing his cousin trotting up behind him, Tuffnut right with him while Fishlegs trailed apprehensively behind, "Don't you have chores or something to do?"

"What, I can't hang out with my favorite cousin?" Snotlout asked mockingly as he slowed to match Hiccup's pace on the young man's right side, Tuffnut taking up a position on Hiccup's left while Fishlegs continued to trail behind.

"I'm your only cousin," Hiccup pointed out sourly, keeping his eyes focused forward as they continued to approach the smithy. Looking up, Hiccup noticed there was no smoke coming out of the smithy's large chimney, meaning that he had beat Gobber there, a revelation that did not brighten the Viking's mood.

"Details," Snotlout replied, waving his hand dismissively, "Anyway, I heard your so-called betrothed had a bit of a scuffle with Astrid last night."

"By that he means Astrid kicked her little princess ass," Tuffnut spoke up with a sneer that caused Hiccup's muscles to tighten up in annoyance.

"Who told you that?" Hiccup questioned, not looking at either of the Viking teens.

"Astrid," Snotlout replied with a sneer of his own, "We ran into her a little while ago."

"And I bet you couldn't wait to come and talk to me about it, huh?" Hiccup questioned, still not looking at the other teens as they approached the smithy.

"Why would you think that, cuz?" Snotlout questioned, though he clearly knew the answer.

"Maybe it was that other thing that Astrid told us about," Tuffnut provided helpfully, still sneering at Hiccup.

"Oh right, about how you were going to bring the Highland brat

flowers, apparently trying to woo the girl that you're already getting married to like the pathetic loser that you are?" Snotlout asked as he leaned against one of the smithy's doorposts, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Or maybe it was how half the village heard her cuss you out not too long afterwards?" Tuffnut added mimicking Snotlout's position on the other doorpost, causing Hiccup to freeze as he reached for the door handle. For the first time, Hiccup looked at the two Viking teens, seeing both of them looking at him with self-satisfied grins. Hiccup then took the time to look over his shoulder at Fishlegs, the other young man seeming to wilt under Hiccup's gaze.

"You got anything to add?" Hiccup questioned darkly.

"I umâ€¦well you seeâ€¦Iâ€¦" Fishlegs mumbled before trailing off, his eyes falling to the ground as he kicked at the dirt awkwardly.

"I didn't think so," Hiccup stated before grabbing the handle of the smithy door, and looking at Tuffnut and Snotlout, "I have work to do."

With that, Hiccup entered the shop and closed the door behind him. Through the heavy wood, Hiccup could hear Snotlout let out a groan while the apprentice blacksmith hung up his vest and put on his apron.

"Honestly Fishlegs, why do we even hang out with you?" Snotlout admonished as Hiccup reignited the furnace and the brazier by the anvil, pumping hard on the bellows to get the flames going, "You're almost as bad as he is!"

With that, silence fell over the smithy as Hiccup took out the sword he had been working on the night before and plunged it into the hot coals inside the brazier, waiting for it to heat up so he could continue work on it some more. Hiccup hoped that was the end of it.

"But I mean really, flowers!?" Snotlout asked incredulously as he flung the door open and stepped in, Tuffnut and Fishlegs following behind him, "I mean, what are you, five?"

Hiccup growled in frustration as he wrapped his hands around a hammer so tight that his knuckles turned white. Hiccup pointedly ignored Snotlout as he grabbed the handle of the sword and pulled it out of the burning coals, the tip of the blade glowing red with heat, before placing it on the anvil.

"Not that it really would have mattered what you gave her," Snotlout continued, walking over to Hiccup and leaning against the anvil while the young man began to hit the molten blade with his hammer, the sharp dinging of iron striking iron echoing through the shop as small sparks shot off the blade, "You could have brought her a Night Fury's head and it wouldn't have changed the fact that she hates her worthless guts."

Hiccup's green eyes narrowed and his face scrunched in fury as he continued to beat the metal, his swings coming harder, sending more sparks flying. Snotlout's smile grew as he saw the rise he got out of

his cousin, Tuffnut chuckling as he looked over some finished swords that were hanging from the racks. Fishlegs meanwhile hovered nervously by the door, glancing occasionally outside.

"Guys?" he spoke up nervously, "I don't think we should be here."

"Oh, grow a backbone, would you?" Snotlout shot at the larger boy, causing Fishlegs to flinch away. Snotlout rolled his eyes and shook his head before turning his attention back to Hiccup.

"Now, what was I talking about again?" Snotlout asked mockingly, scratching his chin for a moment before snapping his fingers and smiling at Hiccup, "Oh right! How much of a loser you are!"

Hiccup growled lowly as he sped up the tempo of his swings, the dinging of hammer striking sword growing louder and louder.

"I mean come on, cuz. You couldn't have really thought that if it weren't for this whole arranged marriage thing that you'd actually have a shot with someone like her," Snotlout stated mockingly, "I mean look at her! And look at you. Wouldn't have worked in a million years and she knows it. She wouldn't even give you the time of day if you weren't going to marry her. And hell, even that's a pretty big if at this point."

Hiccup's face grew into a full on snarl as he angrily beat on the sword, sparks flying in every direction as the blade began to bend out of shape, the Viking teen losing all focus in his anger.

"Let's face it, she hates us Vikings, especially you, but maybe she just needs the right man to bring her around," Snotlout explained, smiling wickedly at Hiccup, "You know, a man like me. I mean, I'm your cousin, so I've got standing, and let's face it, I'm way more of a Viking than you."

The sword had bent completely out of shape as Hiccup visibly seethed, his swings wild, hitting the anvil more often than the blade now.

"So when your dad and her dad finally wise up and betroth her to me, well, then we can really get to know each other, if you know what I mean," Snotlout continued, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively as he sneered at Hiccup, "And then I can show her how a real Viking man treats a woman."

"SHUT UP!" Hiccup roared, whirling to face Snotlout and shouting in the other boy's face. Tuffnut spun around to face them, his eyes wide with surprise while Fishlegs jumped back, almost tripping over the threshold of the door and falling out of the smithy. Snotlout pulled his head back in surprise before recovering and smiling at Hiccup.

"Looks like I hit a nerve," he stated as he smirked at Hiccup again, "What's the matter, runt? Don't like me talking about your little crush like that? Well then you're going to hate it when she's screaming my name as I f--"

"I SAID SHUT UP!" Hiccup bellowed as he swung his hammer around and struck Snotlout hard across the chin with the iron head, the force of

the blow swinging the young Viking around and sending him stumbling away. Tuffnut and Fishlegs looked on in shock as Snotlout cried out in pain, holding his chin with one hand and catching himself on a work table with the other.

"You little jerk! I'm going to-" Snotlout began as he turned around but was interrupted as Hiccup rushed him and struck him hard on the shoulder with the hammer, causing the young man to let out a squeal of pain.

"You're always running your godsdamned mouth like you're the toughest thing to ever walk this island but I know you're nothing but a snotnosed punk!" Hiccup raged as he continued to assault Snotlout, punctuating every sentence with another blow to the shoulder from his hammer, "So why don't you do us all a favor and! SHUT! THE! HEL! UP!"

Snotlout wailed as he reeled from Hiccup's attack, the other boy finishing by kicking Snotlout in the chest, sending him falling to the group where he writhed in pain, clutching his shoulder.

"Hey!" Tuffnut shouted as he moved towards Hiccup and reached out to grab him. Before he could though, Hiccup whirled around, let out a cry of utter rage and hurled the hammer right at Tuffnut, striking the blonde square on his nose with a loud crack.

"Oh, I am hurt!" Tuffnut shouted, reeling back and cupping his nose with his hands, blood already beginning to pour down his face, "I am very much hurt."

"You stupid little bastard!" Snotlout roared, pulling himself to his feet and grabbing a fire poker with good arm, "I'm going to-"

Snotlout was cut off for a third time as he was hoisted off his feet by the scruff of his shirt before finding himself looking into the very angry eyes of Gobber the Belch.

"Ye're goin' tae whit?" Gobber growled, his eyes narrowing.

"I-I-Iâ€¦" Snotlout stammered, dropping the fire poker as he searched for words.

"Nae answer? Fine, Ah'm goin' tae tell ye whit ye're goin' tae dae then," Gobber stated gruffly, "Ye an' yer wee friends are goin' tae leave ma shop, an' ye're nae goin' tae come back in unless Ah say ye can. If Ah find ye inside ma smithy without ma permission then Ah'm goin' tae dae much worse tae ye lot then a broken nose an' a bruised shoulder."

"You can't do that!" Snotlout shouted, suddenly indignant, "Do you know who I am!?"

"O' course Ah know who ye are, ye bleedin' imbecile!" Gobber snapped back at him, "An' Ah know who yer father is too! Sae if ye think either o' those names are goin' tae intimidate me, well, ye've got another thing comin'!"

"I'll make you pay for this you stupid half-" Snotlout began to shout

but was stopped when Gobber held up his missing hand, revealing he was currently wearing a prosthetic that ended in a wicked looking hook.

"Ye breathe another word an' Ah'll pull yer tongue out with a pair o' my tongs an' show it tae ye, understand?" Gobber growled, earning a frightened nod from Snotlout, "Good. Now tae reiterate th' point ma apprentice made. Get out o' ma bloody shop!"

With that, Gobber dropped Snotlout to the ground before giving the boy a sharp kick in the rear that sent him tumbling out the door, where Fishlegs has scurried right after Gobber had entered the smithy. Tuffnut quickly ran after them, holding his bleeding nose with one hand as he helped Snotlout to his feet with the other.

"This isn't the last of this!" Snotlout shouted.

"Is 'at a threat!?" Gobber demanded as he hobbled hurriedly out the door towards Snotlout and the others, grabbing a hatchet off the rack as he did and brandishing it threateningly, "Is 'at a threat!?"

Seeing the angry Viking approaching them with a weapon raised, the three teens quickly turned and ran in the opposite direction as fast as their legs could carry them.

"At's right, ye little punk!" Gobber shouted as he shook the hatchet threateningly after the three young men, "Gae tell yer father about 'at ane!"

Glancing around, Gobber noticed a number of adults looking at him with confused expressions. Scratching his nose awkwardly, Gobber turned and hobbled back into his smithy, slamming the door behind him. Gobber paused for a moment, before sighing as he hung the hatchet back up on the wall. lookingaround, he found Hiccup leaning against his workbench, his breathing calm but his face set into an angry glare.

"Ye alright, lad?" Gobber asked.

"Am I alright?" Hiccup asked incredulously, "Am I alright!? Do I look like I'm alright!?"

"Umâ€|nae," Gobber replied awkwardly, taken aback by his apprentice's anger, "Nae, if Ah had tae say, Ah'd say ye seemed rather upset."

"You're damn right I'm upset!" Hiccup shouted, "I'm sick of everyone in this village giving me crap!"

Roaring in frustration, Hiccup spun around and shook the bench, rattling the tools sitting on top of it.

"Every day, it's the same thing!" Hiccup ranted, resting his hands on the top of the workbench and glaring down at it, "You're so pathetic, Hiccup! Why can't you be more like a real Viking, Hiccup!? Your father must be so disappointed, Hiccup! Why are you so useless Hiccup!?"

"Day in and day out, that's all I hear!" Hiccup continued, calming slightly, "Runt! Pathetic! Loser! Useless! That's what everyone calls me! My cousin. My father."

Hiccup turned to glare at Gobber, a hurt expression on his face.

"You."

"Me?" Gobber asked, pointing at himself and blinking in surprise, "Whit did Ah dae?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me, Gobber!" Hiccup shouted, rounding on his blacksmith master, "I see you chatting with the others! I hear you having a laugh at my expense! Gods, you act like you don't pick me apart every single day!"

"Whit are ye talkin' aboot, Hiccup?" Gobber questioned, throwing his hands into the air in confusion.

"What am I talking about?" Hiccup asked incredulously, before suddenly slipping into an impression of Gobber's accent, "Whit am Ah talkin' aboot? Och, Hiccup ye're far too scrawny tae be carryin' those swords around. Hiccup, Ah cannae let ye out there tae help with th' dragon attack, because ye might dae more damage than th' dragons! Hey, cheer up, lad, at least this way ya can actually help th' village fer a change. Ya know, unless th' Bear King chops yer head off fer bein' too weak an' pathetic fer his daughter an' restarts th' war!"

Grabbing a sketchbook off the table, Hiccup whirled around and hurled it at Gobber with an angry growl, the object bouncing ineffectually off of the large Viking's chest. Gobber looked down and scratched his chest where the book had hit him, before looking back up at Hiccup, the young man still glaring at him.

"And now, finally, something good comes along!" Hiccup ranted, "I find a way to help the village. To prove to everyone that I'm useful, that I have reason to be here, and all I have to do is marry the prettiest girl I have ever seen. Someone new who won't immediately look at me like I'm some kind of waste of space!"

Hiccup paused for a moment to catch his breath, his chest heaving as Gobber watched him in shock.

"I could tell she started to like me to some degree," Hiccup continued after a moment, calmer but his anger clearly rising again, "When it was just me and her, when there wasn't any kind of conflict or pressure on her, she would open up. I saw her smile. I heard her laugh. And then you all came and ruined it!"

Letting out a shout of frustration, Hiccup spun around and slammed his fists against the table with a loud bang. He hissed in pain as he opened his hands, his palms shaking with combined pain and anger.

"I just wanted someone who saw me for me. Not as Hiccup the Useless," Hiccup sighed as he slumped onto the stool in front of the table, leaning his elbows on the tabletop and hanging his head, "Is that so much to ask?"

Gobber observed Hiccup sadly, the young man looking like he was barely holding it together. Guilt ate at the pit of his stomach as the blacksmith thought about what Hiccup had said, specifically what the young man had said about him. Gobber thought about all the times he had made fun of Hiccup, both to the boy's face and behind his back. He couldn't believe he never realized how cruel he was being until now, especially with his own history with the people of village. This was a young man who everyone else shunned, who spent more time with the blacksmith than his own father. Gobber was the person Hiccup looked to for guidance. And Gobber had thrown that trust back in Hiccup's face. The Viking wasn't sure he had ever felt so low.

"Ye're right, lad," Gobber admitted with a sad sigh, "Th' village hasnae ever given ye a break an' Ah haenae always given ye th' best o' support."

Hiccup scoffed, shaking his head and waving a hand dismissively at the blacksmith. Gobber rolled his eyes while he sighed again.

"Fine, Ah ne'er really give ye th' best support," Gobber admitted, reaching up and scratching the back of his head awkwardly, "an' Ah'm sorry fer 'at."

Gobber paused as he watched Hiccup, the young man seeming to think over what the blacksmith had said. Slowly, Hiccup turned to look at Gobber, a hesitant look on his face.

"You are?" Hiccup questioned.

"Ah am," Gobber admitted with a small smile, hobbling over to Hiccup's side and placing his good hand on the young boy's shoulder, "Ah haenae done right by ye, an' Ah aim tae change 'at. Ye shouldnae hae tae worry about somethin' like 'at here."

"Thanks, Gobber," Hiccup replied, smiling up at the blacksmith master.

"Nae problem," Gobber replied, before pausing for a moment, "'At was a really good imitation by th' way."

"Thanks, I've been hearing it a lot lately," Hiccup explained with a chuckle.

"Ah take it all 'at had tae dae with th' princess?" Gobber surmised, his voice turning solemn.

"Yeah," Hiccup replied, his smile fading into a frown.

"Whit happened?" Gobber asked, taking a seat on a stool next to Hiccup.

"Last night, when I was bringing Merida back home after the dragon attack, we had to go and find her horse, Angus. We split up, and while I found the horse, she foundâ€¦something else," Hiccup explained.

"Whit did she find?" Gobber questioned.

"Astrid," Hiccup stated, his eyes unfocused as he flashed back to the

scene from the night before his eyes, "I'm not entirely sure what they were fighting about but when I stumbled on to them they were really at each other's throats. Astrid had a knife and if I hadn't come upon them when I didâ€¦well I don't know what would have happened."

"There are a lot o' auld wounds from our war with th' Highlands," Gobber explained, "Doesnae surprise me 'at th' princess bein' here opened some o' them. Still, Astrid should know better, Ah'll hae tae talk tae her mother."

"I guess that could help," Hiccup replied with a shrug, "That's not really what I'm having a problem with."

"Oh? Whit is then?" Gobber questioned.

"Afterwards, Merida was pretty upset. I tried to help her, but she justâ€¦exploded at me. She told me that she thought all of the nice stuff I was trying to do for her was an act. That I was just trying to be diplomatic. That I hated her just like everyone else in the village," Hiccup trailed off, his expression growing sadder, "That she hated me."

"Ah'm sorry, lad," Gobber said, squeezing Hiccup's shoulder to reassure him, "Sometimes these things daenae work oot."

"You don't get it, do you?" Hiccup asked, a hint of annoyance in his voice as he looked at Gobber out of the corner of his eye.

"Umâ€¦Ah guess Ah daenae," Gobber replied with confusion, pulling his hand back, "Care tae explain it tae me?"

"The only reason she hates me is because everyone in the village has been so hostile towards her since she came here and she thinks I'm just like them," Hiccup explained.

"Probably th' only ane on th' whole island who thinks ye're jist like everyone else in th' village," Gobber commented with a chuckle but quickly bit his tongue when he noticed Hiccup glaring at him, "Sorry."

"Anyway, if I could make her see that I'm not like everyone else, then maybe she would actually give me a chance," Hiccup explained, his voice hopeful.

"Aye, Ah suppose 'at wud work," Gobber agreed with a nod, scratching the back of his head as he thought "But haenae ye already been disproportionately nice tae her? Ah mean, nae offence but it doesnae seem like it's workin'."

"I know," Hiccup groaned, placing his face in his hands as he leaned against the table, "I need to think of some big gesture. Something that, if I pull it off, when she sees it she'll realize that I'm not lying to her. That I really do like her."

"Aye, but whit kind o' big gesture cud yae dae?" Gobber questioned, shrugging his shoulders, "It's nae like ye cud throw her a party or anythin'."

"That's it!" Hiccup exclaimed, sitting up straight and slamming his

hands against the table, startling Gobber as the young man spun around in his seat to face him, "Gobber, you're a genius! I'll throw her a party! A birthday party!"

"Aye, aye, 'at wud work," Gobber replied with a nod, before a thought occurred to him, "When's her birthday?"

"I have no idea!" Hiccup replied, his enthusiasm undiminished as he hopped to his feet, grabbing a pad of paper and a charcoal pencil from the desk, "But I know who does!"

"Who?" Gobber questioned, turning in his seat to follow Hiccup as the young man made his way towards the door.

"Merida's mother, Queen Elinor," Hiccup explained, as he pulled open the door, "Me and her are on pretty good terms."

"How are ye goin' tae ask her?" Gobber questioned, standing up and following Hiccup.

"Well, we had that pigeon coop installed so we could communicate with the Highlanders, didn't we?" Hiccup said as he stepped out of the door, walking backwards so he could continue talking to Gobber, "So far, I'm pretty sure only Merida's used them. No point in letting them sit there."

"Aye, an' it will give Bucket somethin' tae dae too," Gobber agreed with a nod, leaning against the doorframe as he watched his apprentice go.

"We put Bucket in charge of the pigeons?" Hiccup questioned, pausing as he asked.

"Aye, he liked th' birds an' it's not 'at hard o' a job," Gobber explained with a shrug, "Whit are ye goin' tae dae if her birthday's already passed?"

"I'm just going to pray to any god that will listen that it hasn't!" Hiccup called as he began to jog away, "Oh, by the way, I may have kind of, maybe, totally, utterly ruined that sword I was working on. Sorry about that!"

Gobber raised his eyebrow in confusion before turning around and catching a glimpse of the bent sword sitting on the anvil. Gobber sighed in annoyance and rolled his eyes as he realized there was still a lot of work to be done that would have gone faster with his apprentice's help. He quickly decided that it wasn't worth the effort to go chasing after Hiccup. Besides, with everything he had gone through, he could use a little time off. Shaking his head and smiling to himself, Gobber reentered the smithy, closing the door behind him.

Hiccup quickly made his way through the village, writing on his notepad while heading up one of the steep cliff sides that rose above the buildings. Reaching the top, he found the simple set up that Vikings had provided for the messenger pigeons. A simple wooden pigeon coop sat near the cliff edge, housing the dozen birds that were cooing animatedly to one another. Sitting next to the coop on a wooden stool was a large blonde Viking with what looked like an iron bucket attached to the top of his head. He fed the birds seeds and

chunks of bread and every so often would coo along with them.

"Morning, Bucket," Hiccup greeted with an amused smirk.

"Oh, morning, Hiccup!" the big man called, a goofy grin on his face as the young Viking approached him waving at Hiccup with the hook that replaced his right hand. Hiccup always had a soft spot for Bucket, as Bucket seemed to have a soft spot for him. Granted, Bucket seemed to have a soft spot for just about everyone, the injury that he had received which fused his namesake to his head having also seemed to dim his intelligence and mellow his moods. All in all, Bucket was too simple to purposefully insult someone, which meant that Hiccup never received any form of verbal abuse from the blonde Viking, though that didn't mean Bucket never joined in on laughter at Hiccup's expense but Hiccup figured that Bucket just liked to laugh, even if he didn't really get the joke.

"Giving up on fishing?" Hiccup questioned as he made his way over to the pigeon coop, "Don't think Mulch would be too happy about that."

"He wasn't," Bucket replied glumly, shaking his head, "But there aren't many storms back here. Also, I like the pretty birds, much nicer than stinky, old fish. Sometimes I still go fishing, but I like the birds more."

"I can understand that," Hiccup agreed, "I guess you don't get many people up here."

"No, not many," Bucket stated, shaking his head again, causing his long blonde beard to wave about in the wind, "Just Merry mostly."

"Merry?" Hiccup questioned, confused.

"Girl with all the curly red hair," Bucket explained, holding his hand up to his head and wiggling his fingers in an attempt to give Hiccup a visual reference, "She talks funny, like Gobber."

"Oh, you mean Merida," Hiccup replied with a chuckle, "Yeah, I guess she'd come up here often."

"Yeah," Bucket agreed with a nod, "Lots of writings that the birds need to take across the sea."

"Right," Hiccup said with a nod of his own "Speaking of which, I also need to send a letter to the same place that uh, Merry sends them."

"Well, Merry sends them to two places," Bucket explained.

"Two places?" Hiccup questioned, raising an eyebrow at Bucket.

"Yeah, one that way," Bucket elaborated, standing up and pointing towards the west, before turning and pointing south, "And one that way."

"Why does she have two places she sends letters?" Hiccup

asked.

"Well, she says that her family lives over there," Bucket explained, indicating west, before pointing south again, "And over there is her friend Rep..Punzâ€|Perunzâ€| "

"Whoa, don't hurt yourself Bucket," Hiccup said, holding up his hands to stop the tall Viking who was visibly struggling to pronounce the name, "I think I understand."

"Sorry," Bucket apologized, "She has a strange name."

"It's alright," Hiccup replied, before holding up the letter he had written, "Anyway, I need to send this letter sent to Merry's family, okay?"

"Alright," Bucket replied, nodding his head, before turning to the coop and opening one of the doors, reaching in and gently pulling out a grey pigeon, "This bird knows the way. He's a smart bird."

"I'm sure he is," Hiccup agreed, rolling up the paper and helping Bucket tie it to the bird's leg. Seeing it was secured, Bucket released the bird, which fluttered into the sky before flying west, disappearing from view.

"How long will it take for the bird to get back?" Hiccup questioned.

"A few days," Bucket replied with a shrug.

"Alright, I'll see you later then, Bucket," Hiccup stated with a wave as he turned to go, pausing as he thought of something, "By the way, don't say anything about this to Merry. It's a secret, okay Bucket?"

"Okay," Bucket replied, bringing his finger up to his mouth in a shushing motion, "Secret."

"You got it," Hiccup replied, mimicking the motion as he made his way back down the cliff while Bucket returned to his seat and began playing with the birds again.

_A few days later, _

Hiccup made his way up the winding pathways of the cliff to check with Bucket again, as he had done the past few days. He realized that he was being overeager, that he should give the bird more time to get to the Highlands and back, but he needed to hear the queen's response if he was going to go through with his plan. The setting sun hung over the cliff, casting a long shadow as the sun colored the sky orange and purple. Hiccup had hardly seen Merida over the past few days, the princess avoiding everyone in the village the best she could, only appearing in the house for meals in the morning or the evening and pointedly not talking to either Hiccup or his father during those times. It still depressed him that any sort of relationship he had with Merida had collapsed so thoroughly in so short of a time but if his plan worked, then all of that would change.

"Hey, uh, Hiccup?" a familiar voice said from behind Hiccup, causing

him to pause and turn around, surprised to find Fishlegs standing not far away, looking nervously at the ground, "Can I talk to you?"

"Where are Snotlout and Tuffnut?" Hiccup questioned, instantly on edge.

"They're not here," Fishlegs explained, "I haven't really been hanging out with them lately."

"That's surprising," Hiccup stated indignantly, his anger rising, "Seems like the last few years you guys have been inseparable."

"Hiccup, I-" Fishlegs started to say, but Hiccup cut him off.

"You know what, whatever it is you wanted to say, Fishlegs. Save it. I don't want to hear it," Hiccup said before turning and stomping away, "I've got better things to do then waste time talking to you."

"Hiccup, wait up!" Fishlegs called after Hiccup, holding an arm outstretched as he ran after the young man, "I just want to talk."

"Oh, now you want to talk!?" Hiccup shouted, whirling around to face Fishlegs, startling the larger boy so badly that he almost fell backwards, "After how many years of ignoring me!?"

"I just wanted-" Fishlegs began, but Hiccup cut him off again.

"Wanted what!?" Hiccup yelled, causing Fishlegs to take a step away from him, "Wanted to be one of the cool guys!? Well, I guess you couldn't do that if you were hanging out with Hiccup the Useless, now could you!?"

Fishlegs didn't say anything as he casted his eyes to the dusty ground at his feet.

"Don't you get it, Fishlegs!? You were my best friend when we we're little," Hiccup trailed off as he continued to glare at Fishlegs, "You were my only friend. And then one day, you were gone. Hanging out with Snotlout of all people and refusing to even talk to me. You even helped them beat me up from time to time."

"I didn't do anything like that!" Fishlegs exclaimed.

"Yeah, you're right," Hiccup agreed, "You didn't do anything. You just stood there and watched."

"I know," Fishlegs replied sadly, "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry!?" Hiccup said with a laugh, "You think it's that simple? You say you're sorry and I just forgive you and we pretend nothing happened? Do you really think I'm that stupid? I know what's happening. This is all some set up so that Snotlout can humiliate me again."

"This isn't anything like that, I promise," Fishlegs replied, holding

his hands up pleadingly.

"And why should I believe you?" Hiccup demanded.

"Because I just got in a big fight with Snotlout," Fishlegs explained, "I was sick of the way he treated you, especially a few days ago. I was sick of the way he was treating me too. So, I told him off, and he hit me."

Fishlegs rolled up his sleeve, revealing an ugly looking bruise on his right arm which seemed to throb with pain.

"Wow, that looks like it hurts," Hiccup commented sympathetically, all traces of anger leaving him, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Fishlegs replied, hissing in pain as he rolled his sleeve back down, "You should see what I did to him. Seriously, if that didn't convince you then the new shiner that Snotlout will be sporting for the next few days will."

Hiccup blinked in surprise as he thought over the information he had just received.

"Why the change all of a sudden?" Hiccup questioned, "None of this seemed to have bothered you the past few years."

"I don't know, its partially been building up all of these years, but I also saw how happy and hopeful you became over this whole betrothal thing, and seeing Snotlout trying his hardest to wreck it, that really bugged me," Fishlegs explained, looking away from Hiccup again, "A lot."

"Well thanks, I guess," Hiccup replied with a shrug, "You didn't have to do that."

"Like I said, I didn't really do it just for you," Fishlegs said, rubbing his sore arm gingerly, "But I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss hanging out with you."

"Yeah," Hiccup stated, chuckling to himself, "Remember that time we tried to practice dragon slaying and captured that Terrible Terror?"

"And we brought it back to your house and it got loose?" Fishlegs continued, groaning as he laughed, "I thought your dad was going to kill us."

"He almost did when it set my bed on fire," Hiccup replied, laughing as well. The two laughed at the memory for a few moments before looking at each other, smirks on their face.

"Hey, you think you could come help me out with something?" Hiccup asked, gesturing up the path to where Bucket and the pigeon coop were.

"Yeah sure," Fishlegs replied with a smile, falling into step beside Hiccup as the two made their way up the cliff. As they went, Hiccup explained to Fishlegs his current situation with Merida and what he was planning to do for her.

"So, you're hoping that her birthday wasn't like a month or so ago?" Fishlegs questioned as they walked towards the pigeon coop where Bucket was feeding the birds.

"Basically," Hiccup replied with a shrug before turning his attention to Bucket, "Hey Bucket, did that bird come in today?"

"Oh, hello Hiccup, hello Fishlegs, yes, the bird came just a little while ago," Bucket said, reaching into his pocket and pulled out a rolled up length of parchment, "He had this with him."

"Awesome," Hiccup said as he reach out and took the parchment from Bucket, quickly unraveling it and reading over Queen Elinor's elegant handwriting, Fishlegs peeking over his shoulder. As he read, a smile grew over Hiccup's face before he threw his hands into the air and whooped for joy.

"Her birthday is in a few weeks!" Hiccup exclaimed joyously.

"That's great!" Fishlegs said happily.

"I love birthdays!" Bucket added, "Especially my own."

The two boys chuckled at Bucket before turning to face each other.

"So what's the plan now?" Fishlegs asked.

"Now I have to get working on putting the whole thing together," Hiccup explained, "A few weeks isn't a lot of time to plan and get everything I need."

"I can help," Fishlegs offered, smiling at Hiccup

"You want to help?" Hiccup questioned, smirking at Fishlegs.

"Sure, it'll be fun," Fishlegs replied, holding his fist out in front of Hiccup "Like old times."

"Yeah," Hiccup chuckled, knocking his fist against Fishlegs' "Like old times."

"Can I help?" Bucket asked.

"Yeah, you can," Hiccup answered as he pulled out a notepad and a charcoal pencil, "I'm actually going to need to send another letter."

"You can't do that right now, Hiccup," Bucket said, "The bird needs a nap."

"That's alright, I don't need the bird that goes west," Hiccup explained, starting to write his letter as he smirked at Bucket, "I need the one going south."

A/N: It seems more and more like these chapters get away from me with their lengths. Still, can't complain because I love giving you guys longer chapters. Hope you enjoy it! I wanted to do a couple of quick shout outs. First is to Frostymaggie/Maggie296 who made the first ever fanart I've ever had for one of my stories. Go check it out and

show her some love! [frostymaggie*tumblr*com/post/44637798678](https://frostymaggie.tumblr.com/post/44637798678). Also wanted to thank all of you who have been leaving reviews as guests or at least have your private massagers turned off, seeing as I can't thank you individually. You guys rock! Thanks again and as per usual, critiques and feedback is always welcome, so please review! Later!

9. Preparation

A/N: Thanks to all of those who have been reviewing either anonymously or as guests. I saw that a lot of you were excited about Rapunzel's appearance in this chapter, so I felt the need to point out that she won't be a big part of this story, and she is as she appears after my other story, Heaven's Light, just to clear up any confusion. Thanks for reading and enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 9: Preparation

Far to the south of Berk sat another island, much smaller and much closer to the mainland, connected to it by a small stone bridge. The island was completely covered with the urban sprawl of a city. Small stone and wood houses were closely packed together, connected by cobblestone streets. The island, like many others, rose like a hill coming out of the placid blue bay that it sat in, giving the city an incline as it approached the center.

At the center of the island, and therefore, the city, sat a mighty castle. The castle was made of white stone that reflected the sunlight so well the whole structure seemed to glow. Tall towers and spires reached up towards the bright sky, with flags depicting a golden sun on a purple field fluttering in the breeze.

Within one of the many chambers that made up the castle's interior was a library. The library looked out onto the castle grounds and the city beyond through massive glass windows that faced towards the rising sun. Each of the other walls was lined with shelves upon shelves of books, differing in incalculable ways from age to thickness to color and even to language. The only thing that broke up the shelves the stretched from the red carpeted floor to the white plastered ceiling was a fireplace in the western wall and an ornate wooden door in the southern one.

The library was almost completely unoccupied except for a lone person sitting in a plush purple chair near the center of the room. She was young, no older than twenty, with delicate, fair features, and a slim, lithe build. She wore a silken, light purple dress while a silver, bejeweled tiara sat upon her head. She absentmindedly brushed one of her chocolate brown locks that had come loose from her long braid behind her ear as she continued to read her book.

A knock came from the door, causing the young woman to look up from the book.

"Princess?" a man asked as he stuck his head in through the doors, "Princess Rapunzel, are you in here?"

"Yes," she said, giving the man a wide smile, "Please, come in."

The man quickly entered, bowing as he did. Rapunzel noted the man

wore the uniform of a royal messenger and what appeared to be pigeon feathers clung to his clothes here and there.

"Another message arrived from Berk for you this morning," the messenger explains, holding up a rolled up piece of parchment as proof.

"Another one?" Rapunzel asked confused as she marked her place in her book, closed it and set it aside, "Already? Merida just sent me a message."

"I know, milady," the messenger replied, handing the message over to Rapunzel, "But, if I may say, this message does not resemble those written by Princess Merida."

Intrigued, Rapunzel unraveled the parchment, narrowing her emerald eyes as she scanned over it. After a moment, Rapunzel turned the parchment over as if she had been reading it upside-down, but her expression only grew more confused as she looked it over further.

"Is there something wrong, milady?" the messenger asked.

"Um, this seems to be written in runes," Rapunzel explained, an embarrassed look on her face, "I can't read runes."

"I see, a dilemma to be sure," the messenger replied, "I am also unfamiliar with the runic form of writing, but I do believe that there is a book on such a system here in the royal library."

"Oh, that would be good!" Rapunzel exclaimed, beaming at the messenger, "Do you know where it is?"

"I believe it is that one, right there," the messenger replied, indicating to an old, brown, leather bound tome sitting on a shelf against the north wall.

"Thank you!" Rapunzel thanked the messenger with a smile, who bowed in return before leaving. As the door closed behind him, Rapunzel got up from her seat and made her way over to the northern wall, her bare feet brushing quietly across the carpet. Reaching up, she pulled the heavy tome from the shelf before bringing it over to a table which she sat it upon. Pulling a chair over, Rapunzel sat in it and opened the book, coughing briefly on the musty air that came from it. Recovering, Rapunzel lay the note next to book, before grabbing another piece of parchment along with a feather pen and ink well before she began the process of translating the message.

Hours passed and the sun slowly crawled across the sky as Rapunzel translated the message. She knew it would have been easier to just ask for help, there was probably a royal translator who could have told her what was written in the message in minutes, but Rapunzel was nothing if not eager to learn new things. Plus, she had a feeling that whatever was in this message was personal, and she didn't want anyone else privy to its contents.

Rapunzel felt her heart drop as she remembered the contents of Merida's last letter; how it detailed the abuse her friend seemed to be suffering at the hands of the Vikings, especially that awful sounding girl, Astrid. She needed to know why someone had sent her a

message in Runic, and she needed to know soon.

The sun was beginning to set when someone entered the library. Turning to look, Rapunzel's tired expression turned to one of delight, her smile nearly splitting her face. The person was a young man, roughly her own age, wearing a simple green tunic and brown trousers. He appeared to be deformed somewhat, with a largely humped back and a forehead that drooped somewhat over his right eye. His physique was muscular and his features fair.

"Quasi!" she said happily, beaming at him.

"There you are," he replied, smiling as he walked over to her, "I've been looking for you all day!"

"Sorry," Rapunzel apologized, kissing him on the top of his head, his auburn hair brushing against her face, "I've been busy deciphering this message I got this morning."

"Deciphering a message?" Quasi asked, looking at the message and the book sitting on the table, "Who would send you a message in Runic?"

"Well, I just finished, so we can find that out together," Rapunzel replied with a smile, picking up her translated copy of the message.

"Dear Princess Rapunzel," Rapunzel began reading aloud, "You don't know me but you may have heard of me. I am Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third and I am your friend, Princess Merida's betrothed. I'm sure you've heard plenty about how bad things are going for Merida here, and I'm not writing this letter to try and refute what she has said. Instead, I am writing it to say one thing. I do not hate Merida. In fact, I really, truly like her and I am writing this to ask you to help me prove it to her. I know her birthday is in a few weeks and I was hoping to throw her a party. I'm sure she would love it if you could contribute, so I hope to hear from you soon. Thank you."

Rapunzel sat back in her chair as Quasi blinked in surprise.

"Wow," Quasi commented.

"Yeah," Rapunzel replied, "You know, it's just like Merida to miss something like someone being attracted to her. We have to help, for her sake if nothing else."

"You're right," Quasi agreed, "But what should we do?"

"Well, Merida did say she really like my cooking," Rapunzel stated, tapping her chin as she thought, "But it's not like I can send a cake with a messenger pigeon."

"You could send a recipe though," Quasi pointed out.

"You're a genius!" Rapunzel exclaimed, turning and leaning down before kissing Quasi on the cheek, "I just hope this Hiccup knows how to bake."

"He'd have to be a pretty strange Viking to know how to bake," Quasi

stated.

"I have a feeling that Hiccup is anything but an ordinary Viking," Rapunzel replied as she pulled out another piece of parchment and began writing on it.

Meanwhile,

"Hiccup, what exactly are we looking for?" Fishlegs questioned as the two Viking teens wandered through the forest.

"Yew," Hiccup stated, scanning the surrounding trees.

"Me?" Fishlegs asked confusion.

"No, yew, like the type of wood," Hiccup explained, glancing at Fishlegs and rolling his eyes.

"Oh right, sorry," Fishlegs apologized, scratching his head in embarrassment, "What do you need that for?"

"To make Merida's gift," Hiccup explained, stepping over a large, exposed root.

"Right, the bow," Fishlegs grunted, struggling to pull his larger frame over the root, "But why yew?"

"It's sturdy, but flexible, makes it good for crafting bows," Hiccup elaborated, helping Fishlegs over the root, "Aren't you supposed to be the one who knows everything?"

"I am when it comes to things that interest me," Fishlegs replied, brushing his tunic off as the two continued on their way, "Trees do not interest me."

"Fair enough," Hiccup replied with a chuckle.

"So why don't you get some yew wood from Gobber?" Fishlegs questioned as they walked down a hill.

"He doesn't have any," Hiccup explained, "As you may have noticed, not many people in the village use bows, so he doesn't have any and the woodcutters don't make a point of gathering any"

"Do you know what a yew looks like?" Fishlegs asked, before almost walking into Hiccup as the smaller boy came to an abrupt stop in front of him.

"Kind of like that," Hiccup replied, pointing to the large coniferous tree towering over them. Its gnarled wood had a reddish color to it, while its branches hung heavy with red berries and green needles far above their heads.

"Oh," Fishlegs replied in awe as he looked up at the massive tree.

"Come on," Hiccup said as he began to walk towards the tree, Fishlegs following him, "I'm hoping to find a fallen branch or something to carve the bow out of."

The two searched around the tree for a few minutes, unable to find a branch that fitted Hiccup's needs. Eventually, gazing up at the tree, Fishlegs noticed something.

"Hey, Hiccup," Fishlegs said, catching the other boy's attention, "What about that one?"

Hiccup followed Fishlegs' gaze, seeing a low hanging branch that was cracked near the trunk, looking like it could be yanked off with a solid pull.

"Yeah, that should work," Hiccup replied, before walking over to a branch that hung just between the ground and the other branch, "Come give me a boost."

Fishlegs nodded and jogged over, putting his back facing the branch as he bent down and cupped his hands together near his knees. Hiccup placed his hands on Fishlegs' shoulders while putting his foot in Fishlegs' hands.

"Ready?" Fishlegs asked.

"Ready," Hiccup replied. Fishlegs nodded before standing up and pulling his hands into the air. What Hiccup was expecting to happen was Fishlegs lifting him high enough to grab onto the branch. What actually happened was Fishlegs hurled him upwards, sending the smaller boy into the air a few feet above the branch before Hiccup crashed on the branch hard on his stomach, knocking the wind out his lungs in a painful wheeze.

"You okay?" Fishleg's questioned.

"Peachy," Hiccup moaned as he pulled himself to his feet. Carefully standing up so he didn't lose his balance, Hiccup turned to face the weaker branch. Hiccup quickly rubbed his hands together and flexed his fingers while shaking out his muscles. Narrowing his eyes in concentration, he focused his attention on the branch while swinging his arms at his side in his preparation to jump. Mentally psyching himself up, Hiccup counted to three before leaping at the branch. Wrapping his hands around the branch, all of Hiccup's weight pulled on it in the hopes of breaking it off. Instead, Hiccup hung from the unmoving branch, swinging gently in the breeze like a wind chime.

Hiccup sighed in annoyance before looking down at Fishlegs.

"A little help here," Hiccup said, causing Fishlegs to blink in surprise.

"Oh right, hold on a second," Fishlegs replied before hopping a little bit and grabbing onto the lower branch before pulling himself up with a grunt of effort. Pushing himself to his feet, he turned to face Hiccup, who was still hanging from the branch.

"Okay, now, if you grab on, our combined weight should break the branch off," Hiccup instructed.

"Got it," Fishlegs replied, "Ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Hiccup answered.

Fishlegs nodded before leaping into the air. However, instead of wrapping his arms around the branch like Hiccup was expecting him to, Fishlegs instead wrapped his meaty arms around Hiccup's small torso. Hiccup let out a cry of surprise and pain as he desperately tried to hold onto the branch, but Fishlegs' weight proved far too much to support and the two fell to the ground with a loud thud, Hiccup laying on Fishlegs' chest.

"Ow," Fishlegs groaned.

"That could have gone better," Hiccup surmised.

"Yeah," Fishlegs agreed, "Now what?"

"I guess weâ€¦|" Hiccup began before a loud cracking sound caught his attention. Slowly looking up, Hiccup saw the branch creaking and dipping, apparently shaken loose by the small tremor of Fishlegs and Hiccup's impact.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Hiccup moaned before the branch broke off and landed on his stomach with a loud thud. For a few moments, the two Vikings lay there, their voices silenced from pain.

"Ow," Fishlegs groaned again before the two fell into silence once more.

Later,

The two Viking teens made their way through the forest, the yew branch resting on Fishlegs' shoulders.

"Well, that could have gone a lot better," Hiccup commented, rubbing his stomach.

"Hey, at least we got the wood," Fishlegs pointed out.

Hiccup nodded in agreement before pausing as he listened to something. Hiccup's eyes suddenly widened in fear before he leapt onto the ground.

"Get down!" he whispered harshly.

"What?" Fishlegs asked in confusion.

"I said get down!" Hiccup repeated, spinning around and grabbing hold of Fishlegs' legs and giving them a sharp tug, causing the larger boy to lose his balance and fall to the ground with a thud, the yew branch tumbling across the ground next to them.

"Ow, what was that for?" Fishlegs asked irately.

"Shut up!" Hiccup whispered harshly again as he dove onto Fishlegs' chest and covered his friend's mouth with his hands. A moment later, Merida rode into view on the other side of the brush that the two Vikings were hiding behind. Angus snorted as he trotted to a stop before Merida slid from his back. The princess sighed as she began to wander around the area, looking forlornly at the surrounding forest.

"Why are we hiding?" Fishlegs questioned after prying Hiccup's hands off of his mouth.

"This is supposed to be a surprise, remember?" Hiccup questioned, "Don't you think Merida will be a little suspicious if she sees the two of us walking through the forest with a branch of yew?"

"Good point," Fishlegs replied, "So what should we do?"

"We have to get out of here," Hiccup answered while rolling off of Fishlegs' chest. Crawling across the ground on his knees and elbows, Hiccup crawled through the undergrowth, keeping a close eye on Merida as he went. His ears pricking up, Angus turned in Hiccup's direction before he began trotting over in his direction.

"Whit is it, Angus?" Merida asked in confusion, looking over at the horse.

The horse snorted again as he came to a stop, looking down at Hiccup lying on the ground before him. Hiccup looked up at the horse with wide eyes, trying to wave the horse off without attracting Merida's attention any further.

"Angus, whiat's th' matter?" Merida questioned, looking at Angus with concern before she began to make her way over to the horse. Panic began to overtake Hiccup as he looked at Fishlegs in desperation. Fishlegs looked around, trying to think of something to do. Looking to his side, Fishlegs noticed a large rock sitting next to him. Reaching for it, Fishlegs grabbed it and hurled it at a tree behind Merida, the princess not noticing him with her attention on Angus. The rock shattered with a loud bang, causing Merida to whirl around in shock. Seeing his opportunity, Hiccup quickly scrambled away, hiding behind a large rock a short distance away as Fishlegs quickly lay back down.

"Whit in th' world?" Merida asked as she walked over to where the rock had hit the tree. While Merida's back was turned, Hiccup quickly signaled for Fishlegs to come to him. Fishlegs nodded and after picking up the yew branch, made a quiet dash over towards Hiccup. As he did though, Fishlegs tripped and tumbled to the ground, the yew branch smacking him on the head as he fell before it rolled away. Hiccup smacked his face in exasperation, before quickly bending over and grabbing Fishlegs' ankles. Heaving with exertion, Hiccup dragged Fishlegs across the ground, leaving a furrow in the dirt before disappearing behind the rock just as Merida turned around again. Raising an eyebrow in suspicion, Merida scanned the area where the two Viking boys had been moments ago, before shaking her head as if to dispel a thought.

"Weird," she mumbled, before turning to Angus, who had watched the entire scene with his head tilted to the side in confusion, "Come on, Angus."

The horse snorted in reply, giving one last glance to the rock Fishlegs and Hiccup were hiding behind before following Merida as she ventured deeper into the forest. The boys stayed frozen behind the rock, Hiccup red faced and fighting to catch his breath from having to drag the much larger Fishlegs behind the rock.

"I think she's gone," Fishlegs stated as peaked around the rock.

"Good," Hiccup huffed, "Let's get out of here."

Fishlegs picked up the yew branch and heaved it back onto his shoulders before the two quickly made their way back towards the village, weary of Merida making another sudden and unexpected appearance.

The next day,

Hiccup sat at his workbench within the smithy, scraping and sanding the wood until it was completely smooth. Gobber looked up from his work of grinding an axe head to razor sharpness.

"Makin' a bow fer the princess, huh?" Gobber asked, "Been awhile since ye've made ane o' those."

"Actually, it's kind of worse than that," Hiccup sighed, turning to look at Gobber as the blacksmith hobbled over to him, "I've never made the type of bow that Merida uses before."

"Oh, ye mean a recurve bow," Gobber surmised, "Aye, they can be tricky. Ye think ye're up fer it?"

Hiccup looked at the piece of wood in front of him for a few long moment, studying the grain of the scraped and sanded material.

"Yeah, I am," Hiccup said determinedly.

"Well, from whit Ah know, there arenae many more steps involved with it," Gobber explained "Ye jist hae tae make sure tae carve it in the correct shape an' make sure ye heat it properly tae get th' right shape. Other than 'at, ye got tae make sure there are nae kinks or breaks in th' wood an' 'at ye get a strong enough bowstrin'. Recurve bows are a lot more powerful than normal anes an' there's nothin' worse than haein' a bow snap on ye."

"You sound like you've made these before," Hiccup commented.

"Ance or twice," Gobber explained, smiling enigmatically at Hiccup as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Thanks, Gobber," Hiccup stated, smiling at his teacher.

"Daenae worry about it," Gobber replied, turning and making his way back over to the grindstone, "Remember, right shape an' everythin' will be fine."

Hiccup smirked and nodded in reply as he pulled out a whittling knife and began to carve the stick of wood into the shape he pictured in his mind.

The next day,

Hiccup made his way down the cliff from the pigeon coop, reading over the message he had received from Rapunzel, smiling as he did. Glancing up, he saw Fishlegs making his way over to him.

"Hey, Fishlegs," Hiccup greeted his friend as the larger boy jogged over to him.

"Hey, Hiccup," Fishlegs replied, "What do you have there?"

"Letter from Princess Rapunzel," Hiccup replied, holding up the letter so Fishlegs could see.

"What did she say?" Fishlegs asked.

"Well, she wrote a message for Merida," Hiccup explained, showing Fishlegs the message in question as well, "As well as a gift that I can make Merida."

"What is it?" Fishlegs questioned.

"Let's just say it's something neither you nor I have attempted before," Hiccup answered with nervous chuckle, "I just hope that I can pull it off. Anyway, I need to get some string for Merida's gift. The woods being heated right now into the proper shape and I needed to run a few errands."

"Speaking of gifts," Fishlegs said as the two made their way through the village, "You think it would be okay if I got Merida a gift as well?"

"Sure, I'm sure Merida will appreciate any gift that she gets," Hiccup replied, smiling at his friend, "It's not like she's expecting any after all. What were you thinking of getting her?"

"Well, that's the thing, I don't know her enough to think of a gift to get her," Fishlegs admitted, "You got any ideas?"

Hiccup thought for a moment before a thought came to him.

"Well, isn't you mom the village seamstress?" Hiccup questioned.

"Yeah, so?" Fishlegs asked, not getting Hiccup's point.

"So, I get the feeling that Merida doesn't actually appreciate some of the clothing traditions of the Highlands, specifically those concerning women," Hiccup explained, "So, maybe your mom could make Merida some Viking girl clothes. I think she might appreciate that."

"That's a great idea!" Fishlegs exclaimed happily, "I'll go ask her right now!"

"Alright, I'll go finish my errands and I'll meet up with you later!" Hiccup called as Fishlegs jogged off again, waving to Hiccup as he went. Hiccup smiled as his friend disappeared into the village before he went about his business as well.

A few days later,

The bow lay upon Hiccup's workbench, the pale reddish wood polished to a shine, the grain smooth and the form perfectly curved. The young man leaned over the bow as Gobber and Fishlegs flanked him.

"Wow," Fishlegs marveled, looking the bow over, "That looks really good, Hiccup."

"Aye," Gobber agreed, looking at Hiccup with pride, "This may be yer best work yet, lad!"

"Thanks," Hiccup said with a smile, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment, "But I don't even know if it works yet. I test the bowstring a couple of times until I got one that wouldn't snap the instant it was strung, but still, I don't know how well it can fire an arrow."

"Well, there's nae time like th' present," Gobber replied, pulling out an arrow and holding it out for Hiccup.

"You want me to test it?" Hiccup asked incredulously.

"Well, who else is goin' tae dae it?" Gobber questioned, "Th' bows a wee bit too small fer th' likes o' me an' Fishlegs."

"I've never been very good with bows anyway," Fishlegs added.

"Well, neither have I," Hiccup added, addressing Gobber "Remember when I almost took out your eye?"

"It was a good shot," Gobber replied with a shrug.

"I was aiming for a target twenty feet to your right!" Hiccup exclaimed.

"Yer aim was fine," Gobber said, "Th' problem was ye cudnae hold th' bow straight."

"So what makes you think I'm going to be able to now?" Hiccup questioned.

"Let's face it, Hiccup, ye're th' only ane here 'at's th' right size tae fire it," Gobber stated, a smirk on his lips, "Besides, Ah believe in ye."

Sighing, Hiccup looked down at the bow before picking it up. He thumbed the bowstring for a moment, before turning and taking the arrow from Gobber, who smiled down at his apprentice. Exiting the shop, the three made their way around the back of the smithy, Gobber grabbing a target while Fishlegs grabbed the stand. Gobber and Fishlegs quickly set up the target at one end of the smithy while Fishlegs stood on the other end, dubiously looking at the bullseye.

"Alright, lad!" Gobber called as he and Fishlegs stepped to the side, "Give it yer best shot!"

"My best shot is a lot of people's worse shot," Hiccup mumbled to himself as he held the bow by the grip in one hand at nocked the arrow with the other. Looking at the target again, Hiccup took a calming breath before lifting the bow up and pulling the string back, looking down the shaft of the arrow at the target. He took another breath, concentrating on the target, but was distracted when he realized that his fingers were growing weak and he was quickly losing

his grip on the string. Panicking, he let the string go, not realizing that while taking his eye off the target, he had accidentally altered his aim. As such, when he released the arrow, instead of it hitting the bullseye, it soared above it, disappearing behind a nearby rooftop. The three of them watched where it had gone for a few moments before there came a loud screech that sounded like it had come from a chicken.

"Oh, 'at sounded like ane o' Heidi's chickens," Gobber stated while blanching, "We should probably gae back inside."

The two boys quickly nodded and darted back around the smithy, Fishlegs and Gobber grabbing the target as they ran.

"Well, at least you know it works!" Fishlegs shouted as they ran, causing Hiccup to roll his eyes at his larger friend.

A few days later,

Hiccup sat at his workbench in the smithy again, holding the bow in one hand and a knife in the other, whittling at the bow. He flicked some of the wood shavings away with his thumb before blowing on it to dispel the sawdust.

"How's it comin', lad?" Gobber asked from behind Hiccup.

"Good," Hiccup admitted, looking over his handiwork.

"Well, Ah believe Ah hae somethin' 'at will gae along with yer gift rather well," Gobber stated.

"What's that?" Hiccup asked, looking over to Gobber just as the blacksmith walked over to him and placed something down on the workbench. Looking at it, Hiccup realized it was a leather quiver, a large one that was meant to be slung over a person's shoulders.

"You made her a quiver?" Hiccup asked.

"It's nae finished yet but aye, figured it be better than 'at dainty ane Ah noticed her usin' afore," Gobber commented, "Figured she wudnae mind a new ane tae gae along with her new bow."

"Thanks Gobber," Hiccup stated, smiling at Gobber, "You've been a real help. I'm still surprised though. Why are you giving her a present, you've only met her once."

"There's jist something' about her 'at Ah like," Gobber explained, "She's got spirit. Fiery spirit. Ah like 'at. She deserves better than whit she got an' it's good o' ye tae try an' give it tae her, lad."

"Well, thanks again, Gobber," Hiccup stated, smiling warmly at the blacksmith, "You've been a big help throughout all of this."

"Hey," Gobber replied, clapping Hiccup on the shoulder, "It's whit Ah'm here fer, Hiccup."

Later,

"Are you sure about this, Hiccup?" Fishlegs asked, nervously "This

might be too hard to pull off."

"Aye, Fishlegs is right," Gobber agreed, "None o' us hae ever dealt with somethin' like this afore."

"I know, but I have to do it," Hiccup said, "No matter the cost."

Holding up a piece of parchment, he glanced at Fishlegs.

"Besides, the princess gave me the exact instructions on how to do it," Hiccup explained, "It can't be that hard. I mean look, we've got all the ingredients."

Hiccup gestured to the table in front of them as they stood in the kitchen of Gobber's house, a fire burning in the stone oven to their side. Sitting on the table was a collection of items needed to bake a cake, such as milk, eggs and flour, as well as a large bowl to mix it all in.

"We just got to follow each of the steps and we should be fine," Hiccup stated, looking confidently at the others, "What's the worst that could happen?"

_Minutes later, _

The three Vikings stood outside Gobber's squat, stone house, watching as the last of the smoke rising from the fiery remains of what could in no way, shape or form be described as a cake flowed out of the window and chimney. Each of their faces and clothes were covered in a combination of flour, cake batter and soot.

"Well," Gobber said after a moment, shrugging his shoulders, "At least ye didnae burn ma house down, Hiccup. Nae bad fer th' first try, Ah suppose. Probably should let th' kitchen air oot afore we try again though."

"Yeah," Hiccup agreed, letting out a light cough as he tried to brush some of the flour out of his hair, "Probably a good idea."

_Later, _

Gobber yawned as he hobbled up the hill towards his home, the sun setting in the west, casting the village in shadow. It had been a long day, working to both get the various tasks the villagers needed doing as well as helping Hiccup put the finishing touches on his party preparation. The boy had been a bundle of nerves the entire day, both excited and terrified about what the next day may or may not bring. Gobber couldn't help but smile thinking about it, he truly hoped things went well for his apprentice, gods knew he could use a break.

As Gobber made his way closer to his house, he noticed someone leaning against the wall of a nearby building, apparently watching him. Gobber looked at the person in confusion, but as he approached, the figure stepped out of the shadows, allowing Gobber to better see him, which caused the blacksmith's eyes to narrow as he scowled.

"Spitelout," Gobber growled as he eyed the other man.

"Gobber," Spitelout replied, a similar sound of distaste in his voice as he approached the blacksmith.

"Whit dae ye want?" Gobber questioned.

"I wanted to talk to you," Spitelout replied, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Talk tae me aboot whit?" Gobber asked, eyeing the other man wearily.

"About that stunt you pulled with my son," Spitelout snarled, taking a step towards Gobber and pointing an accusatory finger at the blacksmith.

"Whit?" Gobber asked in confusion, "Are ye talkin' aboot me throwin' him oot o' ma shop fer harassin' ma apprentice?"

"No, I'm talking about how you beat him up before hand," Spitelout growled, his anger rising.

"Oh, is 'at whit he told ye?" Gobber asked with a chuckle, "See, th' thing is, Ah didnae dae more than kick him oot of ma shop. It was Hiccup who gave Snotlout a beatin'."

"You expect me to believe that load of crap?" Spitelout spat.

"Believe whit ye want," Gobber replied with a shrug, "Ah wasnae th' only ane there."

"Tuffnut and Snotlout say it was you," Spitelout stated.

"Well, o' course they'd say 'at!" Gobber said with a laugh, "Who wud ye rather tell yer father beat ye black an' blue? Th' Viking 'at everyone says is too weak tae slice his own bread or a full grown man with ten times yer experience?"

Spitelout merely glared at Gobber in reply.

"Besides, th' four o' us werenae th' only anes there," Gobber explained, "Ye should ask Fishlegs whit happened, though ye might find him a wee bit biased too. After all, it wasnae me or Hiccup 'at gave yer boy 'at black eye."

Spitelout's eyes narrowed even further as he dropped his arms to the side while balling them up into fists.

"Ye know, Ah hae tae say, Spitulout," Gobber whispered conspiratorially, leaning towards the other man, "Fer someone who's supposed tae embody everythin' a Viking man should be, yer boy is an awful whiner."

"Don't talk about my son," Spitulout snarled, pointing his finger in Gobber's face.

"Why? Never seemed tae me like ye've had a problem with criticizin' yer own blood," Gobber stated.

"What?" Spittleout asked in confusion.

"Well, Ah'm always hearin' you complain about whit a burden on th' village Hiccup is," Gobber explained, "Or did ye just gae ahead an' forget 'at he's yer nephew? Ah'm sure Val is sae proud."

"Don't talk about my sister you half-breed mongrel!" Spittleout shouted as he grabbed hold of Gobber's vest with his two hands.

"Ye seem very selective about which family members Ah can talk about an' which anes Ah cannae," Gobber pointed out with an edge to his voice, "Sae much fer blood bein' thicker than water."

Spittleout growled in fury as he pulled his fist back to hit Gobber, who quickly followed suit. Before any punches could be thrown though, a powerful hand wrapped around each of their wrist before pulling them apart. The two men stumbled backwards a few feet before catching themselves, finding a large, blond Viking woman standing between them, glaring at them both in turn.

"I'd think you two would be too old now for these street scuffles," she spat, "Neither of you are sixteen anymore."

"Ah daenae know whit ye're talkin' about, Bertha," Gobber replied, chuckling, "Me and' Spitelout here were jist havin' a friendly chat."

"Friendly chat, huh?" Bertha asked, raising an eyebrow at Gobber.

"Well, as friendly o' a chat that me an' Spitelout are capable of' haein'," Gobber stated with a shrug, "Isnae 'at right, Spitelout?"

Spitelout merely growled while glaring at Gobber before turning and leaving, stomping his way down the street.

"You shouldn't antagonize him like that," Bertha admonished, turning to look at Gobber.

"Hey, it werenae me 'at started 'at," Gobber replied, straightening his vest and brushing himself off a little.

"I heard what you said, Gobber," Bertha stated firmly, "He may have said some things, but you didn't do anything to try and calm the situation down."

"Ah'm nae afraid o' Spitelout," Gobber stated seriously.

"And nobody's saying you are," Bertha replied, "But you two can't be getting into fights in the street like you're both still in dragon training."

"Ye're ane tae talk," Gobber said, his eyes narrowing.

"Excuse me?" Bertha replied dangerously.

"Ye're ane tae talk about nae fightin' in th' street when Ah know fer a fact 'at yer daughter has attacked th' princess twice. Ane time

with a knife," Gobber explained.

"She's not exactly fond of the idea of a Highlander living with us. She finds it to be distasteful," Bertha explained.

"Well, 'at's th' understatement o' th' bloody year," Gobber replied, rolling his eyes.

"You know she has a good reason to be angry at the Highlanders, Gobber," Bertha spat, a good deal of venom in her voice.

"Aye, they killed her father. Yer husband. Ah get 'at," Gobber answered, "But isnae th' entire point o' this treat tae breed peace, nae tae force open auld wounds?"

"What are you getting at?" Bertha questioned.

"Whit Ah'm getting' at is 'at since th' princess got here, th' only ane who's been tryin' tae make this treaty work is Hiccup," Gobber explained, "Everyone else has been daein' their best tae make her feel as unwelcome an' unwanted as possible. Nae jist yer girl, nae jist her friends. Everyone. Ye, Spittlout, Stoick, even me, as Ah'm ashamed tae admit."

"You know how our people feel about outsiders, Gobber," Bertha replied.

"Oh, Ah know, Bertha," Gobber replied irately, "If there's ane thing in this bloody world 'at Ah know, it's 'at our village does nae take kindly tae outsiders."

"I didn't mean it like that," Bertha sighed, realizing how badly she had misspoke.

"Ah daenae really care how ye meant it, all Ah really care about is this," Gobber replied darkly, "If, by some miracle Hiccup an' Merida make it through marriage without ane o' them getting' murdered, 'at they somehow manage tae start a family taegether, are ye really goin' tae tell me 'at Ah'm nae goin' tae hear th' same ridicule, th' same prejudice aimed at an innocent child as Ah did all those years ago?"

Bertha was silent, looking away from Gobber and at the ground.

"Aye," Gobber stated after a moment, shaking his head slightly as he turned away from Bertha and began making his way back home, "Ah thought as much."

"I'll talk to her," Bertha stated, watching as Gobber walked away.

"Ye dae 'at," Gobber told her, not bothering to look back as he continued to hobble away, "Or we're goin' tae hae a lot bigger problems on our hands then dragons an' marauders."

A/N: Well, after all of those super serious chapters these past few weeks it felt good to write a relatively light-hearted chapter. It was a bit harder to write, because it's more of a montage, while the other ones are more of single scenes, which are different to write

but I think I managed. I hope you all like it. Feed-back and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

10. Happy Birthday

Chapter 10: Happy Birthday

Merida slowly opened her eyes as sunlight spilled across her face through the window. She blinked in surprise before she squinted against the light, grumbling angrily at being woken from her slumber. Sighing, she rolled over onto her side, her back to the window, before blinking her eyes to clear them. She looked forlornly at the timber walls of her room, so different from the stone ones she had grown up with. She sighed again as she pushed her heavy fur blankets off of her and sat up, a thought occurring to her.

"It's ma birthday," she sighed, a sad expression on her face. She was sixteen years old now. And nobody on the entire island cared.

Over the weeks she had been living on Berk, Merida had slowly gotten over her homesickness, helped, in part, by the resentment she still felt towards her mother. But now it all came flooding back. She was all alone on this island, surrounded by people who hated her. Nobody cared that she had turned sixteen, nobody cared that she was one step closer to true womanhood. Nobody cared at all.

She sighed again. Maybe this was for the best. She was probably better off with no one knowing. She didn't want to give the villagers a specific day that they could single her out on. Especially Astrid. She realized that she was already spending most of her time hiding in the woods, but if there was ever a day she needed to get far away from people on this island, it was today. Perhaps she would swing by the pigeon coop later. Bucket was always nice to her, and maybe she got a letter from home or from Rapunzel. It was better than nothing.

She slid out of bed, her bare feet padding across the hardwood floor of her room over to her chest of clothing. Digging through it, she pulled out a dark green dress and quickly put it on after shedding her sleeping gown, before sliding on her riding boots. She spared a quick glance towards her broken bow, still sitting in the corner where she had placed it weeks ago, before heading towards the door. She marched to the door, her hand reaching out to pull it open and be on her way before the thud of her boots against the wood abruptly changed to the sound of crumpling paper.

Merida froze in place, her hand still outstretched towards the door, a confused look on her face. She shifted her weight back and forth, creating the same sound of crumpling parchment beneath her foot. Taking a step back, she looked down, seeing a folded piece of parchment laying on the floor, apparently having been slid under her door in the night. Her confusion growing, she leaned down and picked the parchment up, unfolding it as she stood back up.

"Happy Birthday, Merida," she read quietly to herself, "Come tae th' clearin' by th' big rock tae celebrate."

A million thoughts raced through Merida's head at once. Who sent this? Why? Her mind immediately provided an answer for the first

question. Hiccup. It must have been him, who else could it have been? No matter what the people of the village thought about her, she doubt any of them had the guts to sneak into Stoick the Vast's home in the middle of the night. But that still left the second question. Why had Hiccup done this? Could he be setting her up for some kind of trap? Could Astrid be waiting for her when she got there? By why would Hiccup do that? It didn't seem like Astrid exactly liked him either. He certainly didn't seem to enjoy tormenting her like the others did. Merida was sure he disliked her, but he didn't seem to be the type to bully someone else. So what could his goal be? He couldn't actually want to celebrate her birthday, could he?

"Nae" she chastised herself, "'At's ridiculous. Why wud he dae 'at? He doesnae care 'at it's yer birthday. Daenae be stupid."

Shaking her head and laughing at herself, she dropped the message on the floor and began briskly walking away. However, as she went, her pace began to slow, until she came to a full stop. Slowly, she looked over shoulder at the message sitting on the floor. What if it wasn't some kind of trick? What if he really wanted to celebrate her birthday? Growling in frustration, Merida quickly shook her head again in an attempt to banish the thought, her hair flying wildly around her.

"Whit's wrong with me!?" she growled, "He's nae daein' anythin' fer me! He's nae throwin' me a party!"

But even as she said that, her thoughts continued to badger her, refusing to be silenced. Turning, Merida looked back at the message as the same thought repeated over and over again.

But what if he was?

"Damn!" Merida suddenly cursed, stamping her feet in frustration, "Damn, damn, damn, damn, DAMN!"

Whirling around, Merida ran over to the message, scooped it up, before dashing back down the hall, down the stairs and out the door before her nerves got the better of her. She briefly thought of taking Angus, but decided against it. If this was where she thought it was, it wasn't far, and she didn't want to waste time getting the horse ready. She wanted answers and she wanted them now!

Running through the woods, the brush grabbed at the hem of her dress, almost trying to stop her, but she refused to even slow down. Her heart raced but her mind was focused on one thing. She had to get to the clearing. She had to see if Hiccup was there. She had to know, she had to know, she had to know!

Bursting into a clearing, Merida stumbled to a stop, her chest heaving, as her hair stuck out in every direction, giving her a wild look. The clearing was wide and open, surrounded by a thick trees and brush. The clearing was covered in bright green grass with a few colorful wildflowers dotting it here and there. A large rock loomed near the center, jutting out of the ground towards the sky. Next to it sat an old tree stump, wide and flat. Behind it, holding some sort of baked good in his hands, was Hiccup, looking at her in bewilderment.

There was a long pause as the two teenagers merely stared at each

other, silent except for the slowly quieting sound of Merida huffing and puffing as she tried to catch her breath. Carefully, Hiccup placed what Merida realized was an unfrosted cake on the stump before awkwardly smiling at her.

"Uhâ€¦H-Happy birthday!" he exclaimed hesitantly, throwing his hands into the air as he laughed nervously.

"Hiccup?" she asked, confusion clear on her face as she scanned the scene, noticing a small number of wrapped parcels sitting next to the stump, "Whit is all this?"

"It'sâ€¦It's your birthday party," he explained, playing with his hands nervously, "You knowâ€¦like the note said?"

"But why?" Merida questioned, growing frustrated as she tried and failed to make sense of what she was seeing.

"Becauseâ€¦it's your birthday?" Hiccup hazarded, unsure of what she wanted him to say.

"Ah know it's ma birthday!" Merida snapped angrily, causing Hiccup to flinch backwards, "Why are ye throwin' me a party?"

"Because I wanted to celebrate your birthday," Hiccup explained, beginning to understand what she was really asking him.

"Why?" she questioned, her voice growing quieter, as if she was afraid of what she was asking, "Why wud ye want tae dae 'at?"

"Becauseâ€¦" Hiccup paused, his face growing redder as he took a deep, calming breathe to steady his nerves, "Because I like you."

"W-Whit dae ye mean yeâ€¦like me?" Merida asked, shaking her head as she ran a hand through her wild hair.

"It means I think you're a reallyâ€¦you knowâ€¦great personâ€¦andâ€¦stuffâ€¦andâ€¦" Hiccup trailed off, feeling incredibly embarrassed as he mentally kicked himself for sounding so stupid.

"An'â€¦" Merida urged him.

"And I thinkâ€¦I think you'reâ€¦what I mean to say isâ€¦" Hiccup rambled, looking everywhere but at Merida. Eventually, he worked up the courage to look at her, his green eyes looking into her blue ones. The sight caused him to just stare for a few moments, taking her in as she looked at him with confused, but pleading eyes. Pleading for what, he wasn't sure, he didn't even think she was sure, but all at once, his nervousness fell away as he rediscovered his voice.

"You're the prettiest girl I ever seen," Hiccup said simply, his gaze never leaving hers.

"W-Whit?" Merida asked, hearing him but not believing as her pale cheeks began to glow pink.

"You're the prettiest girl I have ever seen in my entire life," Hiccup repeated, taking a few steps towards her.

"'A-At's naeâ€|'at's nae true," Merida stated, looking away from him as her face grew redder, "Ah-Ah'mâ€|Ah'm nae pretty."

"Yes, you are," Hiccup insisted, taking a couple more steps towards her.

"Nae, Ah'm not!" Merida snapped, whipping her head back around to glare at Hiccup, though the blush remained on her face, "An'â€|An' ye dae like me!"

"Of course I do," Hiccup argued gently, a small smile on his face as he continued to inch towards the flustered princess.

"Nae, ye dae!" Merida shouted, though it was clear to Hiccup that even she didn't really believe what she was saying, "Ye hate me!"

"I've never once hated you," Hiccup assured her, standing only a few feet away now.

"Yes, ye hae!" Merida insisted, tears beginning to well up in her icy blue eyes, "Because if ye haenaeâ€|then 'at meansâ€|'at means 'at Ah'aeâ€|Ah haeâ€|oh naeâ€|"

As she said this, all the strength seemed to leave Merida's body as her knees suddenly buckled beneath her. Hiccup, only standing a few feet away from her now, reacted instinctively, reaching out and grabbed her waist, catching her before she fell and prompting her to grab onto his shoulders without thinking. For a moment, the two stood there like that, Hiccup holding her up and watching her with wide, frightened eyes as Merida looked at the ground in a daze, her fingers curled in the material of his vest. Gently, Hiccup pulled her to her feet, steadying her while keeping his hands on her hips. Slowly, Merida lifted her head to look at him, tears beginning to leak from the corner of her eyes.

"Is it true?" she asked quietly, "Is everythin' ye said true?"

"Every word," Hiccup replied, smiling at her as he began to notice how close she was to him, his face growing red as he began to fidget with his hands, clearly unsure if he should take them from her hips or leave them where they were.

While Hiccup's words had clearly been intended to reassure her, upon hearing them, Merida suddenly burst into tears, crying as she buried her face into his shoulder as she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him against her. The action caused Hiccup to throw his arms rigidly out to the side as his entire face turned red, a bewildered expression frozen on it. As Merida began to sob into his vest, shaking like a leaf against him, Hiccup slowly regained control of his senses. He awkwardly looked down at her, unsure of what to do before slowly wrapping his arms around her small frame.

"H-Hey," he said nervously, patting her on the shoulder, "It'sâ€|It's okay. No reason to cry."

"Nae reason tae cry?" Merida asked incredulously, pulling away to take a better look at him, placing her hands on his shoulders while his slipped back to her hips, looking at him with red rimmed eyes, "Hiccup, daenae ye realize how awful Ah'ae been tae ye?"

"What do you mean?" Hiccup questioned, trying to shrug the topic away.

"Hiccup, Ah tried tae kill ye th' first day we met!" she exclaimed, pulling away from him and taking a step back, causing Hiccup's arms to fall loosely to his side as she took the opportunity to wipe her tear stained face, "Tae say nothin' aboot all th' awful things Ah'ae said tae ye!"

"That's all in the past," Hiccup replied, shrugging as he rubbed the back of his neck, "I mean, you were under a lot of pressure. I probably would have reacted the same if I was in your situation."

"Hiccup, ye are in ma situation," Merida pointed out while giving him a blank look. Hiccup shrugged again, causing Merida to sigh before rubbing her eyes again and running her hands through her hair. The expression on her face looked miserable.

"Ye must think Ah'm awful," she moaned, her voice little louder than a whisper.

"Not at all," Hiccup replied, reaching out and placing his hand on her shoulder.

"Hiccup, Ah tried tae kill ye," she repeated, "Ah daenae understand how ye can jist forgive 'at sae easily."

"Because you had the chance to kill me and you didn't take it," Hiccup explained.

"Ye talked me down," Merida replied.

"I may have convinced you, but I think if you were honest with yourself, you'd know that you wouldn't have done it, regardless of if I had said anything or not," Hiccup insisted, smiling warmly at her. Seeing this, and thinking over his words, a small smile appeared on Merida's face as well, before she glanced over at the stump where the gifts and cake sat.

"Ah cannae believe ye did all this fer me, after how awful Ah treated ye," Merida stated, before looking back at him, "Why?"

"Why what?" Hiccup asked in confusion.

"Why wud ye throw me a party when any other person wud hae written me aff as a horrible person an' hated me back?" Merida explained.

"I knew that if I could show you that I didn't hate you, that you would probably come around," Hiccup replied, smirking as he shrugged at her, "Besides, I've never been known for doing what any other person would do."

The comment caused Merida to chuckle, before her expression turned shy as a blush lightly colored her cheeks.

"Did ye mean it?" she asked, "Whit ye said earlier?"

"About what?" Hiccup asked, slightly confused.

"'At ye thought Ah was pretty," Merida elaborated, her face growing redder.

"Oh!" Hiccup exclaimed in realization as he blushed as well, scratching the back of his head and looking away from her, "I mean, of course, it's obvious isn't it? You must have had all the Highland men writing you sonnets and stuff."

"Nae," she replied, her smile growing as she shook her head while looking at her feet as well, "Nae ane has ever called me pretty afore."

"Oh," Hiccup said in surprise, "Well. Everyone else must be blind then."

The comment caused Merida to gasp lightly as her face turned almost as red as her hair, looking straight down and letting her hair hang over her face in an effort to hide from Hiccup. Hiccup smiled and blushed as well before coughing awkwardly into his hand.

"Anyway, how about we move on to less awkward subjects?" Hiccup suggested, causing Merida to lift her head slightly, looking at him through her hair.

"Alright," she agreed.

"Well, over here we have a multitude of gifts for you," Hiccup explained, gesturing dramatically towards the stump as the two of them began to walk over to it, "As well as a cake that I baked for you."

"Ye baked me a cake?" Merida asked in surprise.

"I hear the surprise in your voice and it is entirely appropriate," Hiccup joked while smiling at her "I almost burned the village down trying to do it."

"How did ye learn tae bake?" Merida questioned as they reached the stump, Hiccup sitting on one side and Merida on the other.

"From a friend of yours," Hiccup explained, before reaching down and pulling out a rolled up parchment and handed it to her. Taking it, Merida raised an eyebrow at him before he urged her to open it. Unrolling it, she found a letter written on the parchment.

"Dear Merida," Merida read aloud for Hiccup's benefit, "Happy Birthday! Ye're sixteen now? Wow, daenae Ah feel auld. Ah hope ye enjoy today an' all th' days after it. Hiccup sounds like a really great guy an' Ah think ye should give him a chance. Ah know ye've always been against th' arranged marriage thing an' Ah'll never know whit it's like bein' in yer shoes (ye know how Ah feel aboot shoes) but Ah think ye should give him a chance. Things happen fer a reason, whether 'at means th' love o' yer life comes stumblin' into yer tower ane day or ye end up arranged tae marry him tae save yer peoples. Okay, maybe Ah'm getting' ahead o' maself but ye know whit a hopeless

romantic Ah am. Ah hope he did a good job with ma cake recipe! Both me an' Quasi wish ye well, an' Ah hope we get tae see each other again soon! Love, yer best friend, Rapunzel."

"Well, she certainly doesn't beat around the bush, does she?" Hiccup asked, blushing.

"Rapunzel isn't anythin' if nae blunt," Merida agreed with a chuckle, "Sae, this is her cake recipe?"

"Yeah, she said it was your favorite," Hiccup explained, reaching down and picking something up from next to the stump before handing it to Merida.

"This came with the letter," Hiccup explained, "I wasn't sure what the significance of it was, but I figured you would know."

Looking at what Hiccup had handed her, a smile crossed Merida's face as she looked at it. It was a small figure whittled from a block of wood. Specifically, it had been whittled and painted to resemble her, from her red mane of curly hair to her position of aiming with her bow and arrow.

"Ye're right, Ah dae know," Merida said with a smile, "It's a bit o' a long story though."

She looked up and smiled at Hiccup.

"Ah'll hae tae tell ye some time," Merida stated.

"I'd like that," Hiccup replied with a smile of his own, before reaching down and picking up another parchment and handing it to her. Her smile grew as she took it, unfolded the parchment and began read it aloud.

"Dear Merida," she read, "Sae, since Boyd cannae be relied on tae stay focused enough tae write a sentence, let alone an entire letter an', crazily enough, Andra's handwritin' is terrible tae th' point o' bein' indecipherable, Ah hae tae write this. Tae say we were surprised when Hiccup wroe us about plannin' yer birthday wud be a pretty big understatement. In fact, Ah'll be honest, Ah thought it was a joke at first. Whit kind o' Viking plans a birthday party? Well, apparently, this ane does. Sorry tae say there's nothin' we cud get fer ye 'at th' little bird cud carry. Didnae stop Boyd from tryin' to give it a sack of sweet rolls tae carry but hey, 'at's Boyd fer ye. Regardless, we all hope ye have a great birthday, an' Ah think ye should give this Hiccup lad a chance. Ah get th' feeling he might surprise all o' us. Yer friends, Will, Boyd and Andra."

"Seems like ye're getting' all sorts of glowin' recommendations," Merida commented, smirking at Hiccup.

"What can I say, people are starting to come around to how awesome I am," Hiccup shrugged, eliciting another laugh from Merida, "I got another letter for you."

"Who from?" Merida questioned. She had to admit, she was having fun with this.

"I think this one is from your dad," Hiccup explained before handing

the rolled up parchment to Merida. Her smile growing even wider, she took the parchment and unrolled it.

"Dear Merida," she read aloud, imagining every word in her father's voice, "Ah can hardly believe 'at ye're already sixteen. It seems like only yesterday 'at th' midwife handed ye tae me all wrapped up in yer swaddlin' clothes. An' now, here ye are, practically a woman grown, out havin' adventures all yer own. Ye hae a lot tae learn, but Ah am proud o' th' woman ye hae become an' th' ane ye are becomin'. Everyone at th' castle misses ye terribly, yer brothers especially. Maudie is doin' th' best she can tae reel them in, as it is comin' time fer them tae start takin' their royal lessons. Yer mother misses ye as well, an' Ah wish ye wud find it in yer heart tae forgive her. She loves ye dearly, an' only wants th' best fer ye, even if 'at conflicts with her sense o' duty. Ah'm still nae sure whit tae think o' this Hiccup fellow, he's nae whit Ah was expectin' when we arranged this marriage. But it seems he wants tae make ye happy, an' 'at makes him alright in ma book. Happy Birthday, Merida. Love, Da."

Hiccup had noticed Merida cringe up slightly at the mention of her mother and covertly slid another message into his pocket as he thought of something to say.

"So your brothers are going to have to get ready to take over for your father, huh?" he questioned, catching Merida's attention, "How does that work? Do they rule together?"

"Nae, technically Harris is th' heir apparent, as he came out first," Merida explained, "If everythin' gaes well, Hubert an' Hamish will gain lordships o' their own, dividing the traditional lands of Clan DunBroch between them while Harris rules th' country as a whole."

"I see," Hiccup stated, "Did you ever think you were going to be Queen of the Highlands?"

"As a little girl, Ah dreamed Ah'd be," Merida explained, a dreamy look on her face, "Ah wudnae hae been th' first, ye know."

"Who was?" Hiccup asked.

"Her name was Boudica, th' wife o' th' leader o' th' people who wud become ma people," Merida explained, "When he died, his lands were supposed tae pass tae his children, but th' Great Empire, our people's auld mutual enemy, who was supposedly their ally, tried tae take it fer themselves. Boudica wudnae let them, sae they invaded. She fought back."

"What happened?" Hiccup questioned.

"Our people won a few battles, but ultimately, th' Empire was too strong, an' we were defeated," Merida said sadly, "They say 'at Boudica hid her children afore confrontin' the Imperials by th' loch near ma home in th' middle o' winter an' killed their general afore castin' herself intae th' loch sae they cudnae capture her."

"Wow," Hiccup whispered, amazed.

"Aye," Merida agreed, "My Da says 'at her children lived on an' their descendants ultimately became Clan DunBroch. At's why th' clans chose

ma Da tae be king; they felt it was his right due tae bein' descended from her."

A silence fell between the two as a sad smile crept across Merida's face.

"My Ma always use tae tell me about how th' blood o' th' first Queen o' th' Highlands ran through ma veins," Merida said quietly, "She used tae call me her "Little Boudica""

The smile fell away from Merida's face as she stared blankly at the stump.

"'At was a long time ago, though," she stated darkly. Hiccup scratched the back of his head awkwardly as he thought of something to say.

"Well, that's enough reminiscing about the past, I think," Hiccup stated, "We've still got presents to open after all."

"Ah cannae believe ye got me presents," Merida said, smiling as her mood lightened.

"Hey, what kind of birthday doesn't have presents?" Hiccup questioned, "I really lame birthday, that's what. Besides, these aren't all from me."

"They're nae?" Merida questioned.

"Nope, let's see," Hiccup said as he reached down and picked up a burlap sack roughly the size of his head, "I think this one is from Bucket."

"Bucket?" Merida questioned as she took the sack. Attached to it was a small note, which she pulled off.

"Tae Merry. Happy Anniversary. Bucket. 'At's me," she said with a small chuckle.

"Well, I guess it's kind of an anniversary," Hiccup said with a shrug, "Hel, I didn't even know he knew that word."

Smiling, Merida pulled open the sack and reached inside, retrieving an iron bucket, causing her to laugh.

"Well, I guess we shouldn't have really expected anything else from him," Hiccup commented with a chuckle.

"Th' craziest thing is 'at it fits perfectly," she said, before turning the bucket upside down and placing it on her head, where it sat perfectly balanced, causing them both to laugh.

"Well, I guess if there would be one thing Bucket knows, it would be buckets," Hiccup commented, causing Merida to snort with amusement as she took the bucket off her head and placed it to the side.

"This next one is from Fishlegs," Hiccup explained as he handed Merida a bundled up parcel.

"Fishlegs?" Merida questioned, "Isnae he ane o'â€|Snotlout's

friends?"

"He was," Hiccup explained, "They had a bit of a falling out. He was a close friend of mine way back when, so we've been hanging out again lately. He's been helping me get this party together."

"Ah'll hae tae thank him," Merida said, before untying the parcel. She was surprised that when it unraveled, she found a bundle of clothes laying in front of her.

"Whit's all this?" she questioned with a bemused smile.

"Fishleg's mom is a seamstress, the best in the village in fact," Hiccup explained, "We figured you didn't seem to really like the style that ladies of the Highlands wear, so maybe a Viking girl's clothes would be more your tastes."

"Can Ah try them on?" she asked with an excited smile.

"Right now!?" Hiccup blurted out, his whole face turning red.

"Aye, Ah'll jist gae change in th' woods," Merida explained, before a sly grin crossed her face, "Whit, did ye think Ah was goin' tae strip down, right here in front o' ye?"

Hiccup clamped his mouth shut, but the bright red shade of his face spoke volumes.

"Ye did!" she laughed, "Well, last time Ah checked it was ma birthday, nae yers, cheeky bastard. Ah know ma opinion o' ye has taken a very sudden an' pleasant turn an' we are betrothed an' all, but Ah'm nae goin' tae give ye a show jist like 'at. Whit kind o' girl dae ye take me fer?"

"I-I-Iâ€¦wellâ€¦you seeâ€¦that is Iâ€¦" Hiccup mumbled, unable to form a coherent sentence in his panic.

"Relax, Hiccup, Ah'm jist playin'," she said with a laugh as she stood up and picked up the bundle of clothes, "Ye're very cute when ye get flustered, Ah'm surprised Ah didnae notice 'at afore."

Hiccup couldn't say anything as he flushed an even brighter shade of red.

"Ah'm goin' tae gae try these on, okay?" she said as she made her way towards the tree line, walking backwards so she could continue talking to him, "Nae peekin' now, ye hear?"

"R-Right!" Hiccup exclaimed far too loudly, causing Merida to laugh again, "No p-peeking."

"There's a good lad," Merida teased as she stepped behind the trees and out of view. She couldn't help laughing to herself, a smile seemingly permanently affixed to her face. She couldn't believe the difference in how she felt compared to just that morning. All because of Hiccup.

As she undid the binding of her dress, she glanced back over the shoulder at Hiccup through the foliage. She had expected to try to steal some glances in her direction, and she would have been lying if

she said that the thought of stripping down in front of him hadn't made her blush. Instead, she smiled as she saw he was facing completely away from her, pointedly not looking in the direction he knew she was changing. Her heart beat a little faster when she realized how important his word to her apparently had been.

As she continued to watch him, letting her dress fall to the ground, a blush crossed her face. All of a sudden, she noticed how handsome he was. Perhaps not as masculine or tall or in all the other ways the maids in the castle had chatted about, but in a way all his own. She was stunned she hadn't noticed before, but realized that her own emotions and opinions had clearly gotten in the way. Not anymore, she vowed. It was time to give Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third his fair shake.

After a few minutes, Hiccup began to wonder if anything was wrong and turned to ask Merida if everything was okay. He was stopped though as she emerged from the bushes, her dress and underdress slung over her shoulder as she approached him in her new clothes, smiling widely at him. She wore a light blue short sleeve shirt, the same shade as the dress she had worn when they first met, he realized, that clung tightly to her frame. Over it, she wore a dark green vest made of wool with a large hood hanging down her back. Around her waist hung a skirt that resembled the kilts that the Highland men wore, the blue and green material hanging down to her knees. Her legs were covered by a pair of navy blue leggings that tucked into her shin-high riding boots. On her pale arms, she wore a pair of dark brown, fingerless, leather gloves that ran all the way up to her elbows.

"How dae Ah look?" she questioned, holding her arms out and turning in place so that Hiccup could see.

"You look amazing," Hiccup whispered, his eyes wide.

"Thank ye," she replied, smiling and walking over and placing her dresses down as a blush spread across her face.

"There's ane thing, though," she said, before pulling out a thin piece of dark green fabric, "Ah daenae know whit this is fer."

"I think you're supposed to put that in your hair to hold it out of you face," Hiccup explained, "Maybe Mrs. Ingerman thought it was strange for an archer to have all that hair waving around all the time."

"Ah suppose ye're right," Merida agreed, as she pulled some of her hair back out of her face and began wrapping the cloth around her hair, "Ah've ne'er been able tae braid it. It's jist tae curly. This might suit me better. How does it look?"

As Merida lowered her arms, Hiccup could see the cloth sat on the top and back of her head, holding her hair out of her face and bunching it up in a bushel that ran down her back and fanned out as it got lower.

"Great," he answered, smiling at her, causing her to smile back.

"Ah daenae know whit Mrs. Ingerman was worried about though," Merida said as she sat next to Hiccup, "Ah'm nae much o' an archer without ma bow."

"Well, this next present may help with that," Hiccup said as he reached over and grabbed a long bundle before handing it to Merida. Merida looked at it quizzically for a few moments before unwrapping it. When she reached what was inside, she let out a gasp and almost dropped the gift.

She looked at the recurve bow in her hands in utter, flabbergasted shock. The wood was finely polished and a dark, reddish brown in color. Looking closely, she saw that images had been carved into the wood. Leaning down to get a better look, she realized they were images of bears, their mouths open to show their pointed teeth as their claws raked through the air. There were four bears in total, each depicted differently from the others, their images running from the tips of the bow to the center grip. On the grip, facing forward, the symbol of the Highland Kingdoms had been carved.

Holding the bow gingerly in one hand, she placed the other over her gaping mouth as she looked at it with watery eyes.

"It's beautiful, Hiccup," she whispered as she turned her attention back to him, "Didâ€¦Did ye make this?"

"Yeah," Hiccup replied, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment, "Yeah, I did."

"Hiccup, this bow is gorgeous!" Merida exclaimed, smiling in wonder at him, "Ah didnae know ye cud dae this!"

"Neither did I," Hiccup admitted.

"Whit?" Merida asked in confusion.

"I've hardly ever made bows, and I've never made a recurve bow before," Hiccup explained, smiling nervously at her. Merida stared back at him, her mouth hanging up in mute shock.

"Ye're jokin'," she stated.

"Nope," Hiccup replied, "Ask Gobber if you don't believe me."

"Ah jistâ€¦Ah cannae believeâ€¦" she muttered, utterly shocked, as she looked over the bow before looking back at Hiccup, "Ye cud be th' greatest weaponsmith o' our generation."

"Oh wow," Hiccup replied, blushing, "That'sâ€¦that's too much of a compliment."

"Ah call it like Ah see it," Merida stated, before sighing, "Ah just wish Ah cud test this beaut out."

"Well, you're in luck," Hiccup said, handing her the last parcel before standing up, "You open that and I will be right back."

Merida looked at him quizzically for a few moments before turning her attention to the parcel. Attached to it was a note.

"Tae Princess Merida. Happy Birthday. From, yer friendly village blacksmith, Gobber th' Belch," she read, smiling before opening the parcel. She drew in another quick breath as she saw what it

was.

Pulling it out, she looked at the large, leather quiver she held in her hands. The leather was dark and strong and Merida smiled as she saw the looping patterns similar to Highland designs stitched into the material. Reaching into it, she pulled out one of the white fletched arrows and examined it. To her amazement, the iron arrow heads had the snarling visages of bears carved into them.

"Yeah, Gobber liked the bear design idea too," Hiccup explained as he set up a stand nearby, before turning and walking behind the large rock. Merida raised her eyebrow as she heard Hiccup huffing and puffing before he waddled back into view carrying a bullseye. He quickly set it up before setting away, taking a few breaths as he stepped away.

"Here's your target, Merida," Hiccup said, smiling at her, "Think you're still as good as you were or have your skill gotten rusty?"

"At sounds like a challenge, laddie," Merida pointed out, grinning as well.

"Take it as you will," Hiccup replied, holding his hands up in an act of surrender as his smile grew, "The target will tell us if it's true or not."

Merida smirked at him as she stood up, taking the bow in her hands and slinging the quiver around her shoulders, taking a moment to adjust to the weight. She walked over to the front of the target before backing away as far as the clearing would let her. Taking an arrow out of the quiver, she nocked it on her bow. Taking a moment to feel the grip of her new bow, she gently pulled the bowstring back, smiling at the sound of the creaking, oiled wood. Taking a calming breath, she raised the bow so the arrow was level with her eye, looking down the shaft at the target nearly on the other side of the clear. Smirking, she released her breath as she simultaneously loosed the arrow, sending it spiraling through the air before digging into the dead center of the target.

"You've still got it!" Hiccup called as he pulled out a knife and sliced out two pieces of cake, handing one to her as she walked over to him with a giant smile on her face, "Birthday cake for the birthday girl."

The two smiled at each other as they bit into the cake, grins plastered on their faces as they watched each other chew. There was a few moments of silence before they both paused in their chewing at the same time.

"Hiccup?" Merida asked, spewing crumbs from her full mouth.

"Yeah?" Hiccup questioned through the cake.

"This cake is shite," she stated, her eye twitching slightly.

"Is it?" Hiccup questioned, his eyes watering.

"Aye," Merida answered, fighting her gag reflex.

"Good," Hiccup replied before they both turned and spat the cake out on the ground, dropping the remaining cake on the ground, "I was beginning to worry that was what it was supposed to taste like, then I would have never understood the appeal."

Later,

Night had fallen over the village and Merida admitted to wishing it could go on just a little bit longer. She and Hiccup had spent the rest of the morning, and then the afternoon, and then the evening together. They talked about everything. Their lives before they had met. The stories they had shared with their friends. Merida giggled at the idea of Hiccup and Fishlegs smuggling a Terrible Terror into the village while Hiccup had laughed at the story of how Will had convinced Boyd that a giant sea monster lived in the loch by Merida's home and how he had refused to step foot on the lake's shores for years afterwards. Merida had even taken the time to recount to Hiccup the tale Rapunzel had told her about how she and Quasimodo met and the adventure they had afterwards.

Night had fallen, and after managing to scrounge up a meal in the kitchen downstairs, during which they were briefly joined by Stoick, who managed a half-hearted congratulations for her birthday, the two had decided it was time to retire to bed. Walking up together, Merida felt a strange nervousness come over her. As she approached her door, Merida noticed Hiccup following her. Stopping in front of her door, the two smiled nervously at each other.

"Well, Ah hae tae say, this has been possibly th' best birthday Ah hae ever had," Merida stated, letting out a nervous giggle, "Which is sayin' somethin', since Ah was expectin' it tae be th' worst."

"What can I say?" Hiccup replied with a shrug, "I aim to please."

"Really though, Ah cannae thank ye enough," Merida said, her voice sincere, "Ah treated ye sae horribly, an' ye gave me this wonderful gift in return. Ah daenae think Ah'll ever be able tae make it up tae ye."

"Don't worry about it," Hiccup replied, waving the comment off, "I'm just glad you're happy."

"Ah'm more than happy, Hiccup," Merida stated, looking at Hiccup through half-lidded eyes, "Ye've changed ma opinion on a lot o' things today."

"Well, maybe I can change your opinion on one more thing," Hiccup stated as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a rolled up piece of parchment, before handing it to Merida, "This is from your mother. You didn't really seem to be in the mood to read it earlier, so I figured I wait until later. So, here you go."

Merida looked at the parchment dubiously for a few moments, trying to decide what to do. Could she forgive her mother for everything that had happened? Could she bear to read her words? She was still hurt over what had happened all those weeks ago. But Hiccup and her father were right. Perhaps she should give her mother a second chance. She had given Hiccup a second one, and look how well that had turned out. Sighing, Merida opened the letter and began to read it aloud.

"Dear Merida," she began, her voice neutral, "Ah hope this message finds ye well. Ah am saddened tae hear aboot th' troubles ye hae been havin' in Berk. Ah am more saddened tae nae hae heard aboot them from ye. Ma heart aches every time Ah think back tae 'at day, recountin' everythin' Ah did wrong. Ah was sae focused on teachin' y' th' lessons o' responsibility an' 'duty 'at Ah forgot who Ah was tae ye. Ah acted as though Ah was yer queen, when Ah should hae acted as yer mother. Ah will ne'er forgive maself fer 'at. Ye are ma sweet baby girl, an' havin' tae give ye away was th' hardest thing Ah hae ever done."

Merida paused in her reading to wipe at the tears that were forming in her eyes. Hiccup reached out and rubbed her arm with his hand, which she smiled at.

"Always know 'at ye will be here with me in ma heart, as Ah hope 'at Ah may ane day be with ye in yers again. Dae nae be afraid tae open yer heart tae others, Merida, especially th' boy. Hiccup is a good lad, sae unlike his father, sae unlike any Viking who Ah hae ever known an' possibly ever has been. Ah think ye might be surprised if ye give him a chance. Ah hope yer birthday is everythin' ye want it tae be, ma young lady an' Ah dare hope 'at Ah hear from ye soon. Be well maâ€¦!"

Merida choked a little, covering her mouth with her hand as tears fell down her cheeks.

"Ma little Boudica. Love, now an' forever, yer mother."

Hiccup reached up with his other hand, placing it on Merida's other shoulder, which was beginning to shake.

"Merida, are youâ€¦!" he began to say but was cut off when Merida flung her arms around him, pulling him into a tight embrace. Hiccup was caught off guard for a moment, before gingerly returning the hug as Merida cried into his shoulder. Eventually, after a few minutes, Merida's crying slowed to a stop and she pulled away to look at Hiccup.

"Thank ye, Hiccup," Merida stated, whipping her eyes on the back of her hand, "Thank ye fer everythin'."

"Like I said before," he said with a smile, "I just like to see you happy."

"Ah like tae see ye happy too," Merida replied as a nervousness she had never felt took over her. The two stood in awkward silence for a few moments, before Hiccup began to back away.

"Well, I better go get some rest," he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Aye, me too," Merida agreed.

"I have to do some work for Gobber tomorrow," Hiccup continued.

"Wake me up when ye gae, Ah'll come with ye," Merida offered.

"Really?" Hiccup questioned, surprised.

"Aye," Merida replied, nodding and smiling earnestly.

"Alright," Hiccup said, returning the smile, "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"See ye tomorrow," Merida agreed. She watched Hiccup turn and begin to walk away, before an urge came over her that she knew, if she didn't act on it, she would regret it.

"Wait," she said, quickly reaching out and grabbing Hiccup's hand, stopping him.

"Huh?" Hiccup questioned, but before he could say anything more, Merida pulled on his arm while at the same time standing on her toes, pulling him over enough so she could kiss him on the cheek. As her lips brushed against his flesh, it seemed like an eternity for the two of them, an electric spark passing between them. Then, all at once, there was a flash of red hair, a hasty bid good night and the closing of a door, and Hiccup stood alone in the hall.

Slowly, his eyes wide, Hiccup brought his hand up to where Merida had kissed him, finding the flesh still warm to the touch. Slowly, the shock wore off, replaced by a growing sense of jubilation. A smirk began to grow on Hiccup's face, quickly becoming a grin, then a smile, then a full-toothed expression of happiness that threatened to tear his face in two.

"Yes!" he whispered to himself, pumping his fists and dancing goofily down the hall, before kicking his door open, humming happily to himself as he readied himself for bed.

Meanwhile, Merida leaned her back against her door, slowly sliding to the floor, a grin on her face along with a blush. She brought her hands up to her face, giggling into them. Yes, this really had been the best birthday ever.

A/N: Yes, this chapter was so fun to write! I've been building up to this for a while, so I hope you guys enjoyed it! Also, yes I realize that Boudica wasn't Scottish, but this is my pseudo-historical fantasy world and I will transpose historical figures as I see fit. But in all seriousness, hope any history buffs out there didn't mind too much. Also hope you guys liked my design for Merida as well. As always, critiques and feedback is always welcome so please review! Later!

11. Fire Burn and Cauldron Bubble

A/N: Before we start, I just wanted to thank all of you guys for making this my most reviewed and all around most successful story I have ever written. It means a lot that so many people are enjoy the story. I hope you all like what's to come! You guys are the best!

****Chapter 11: Fire Burn and Cauldron Bubble****

Merida smiled as she made her way down the hill towards the center of

the village, Hiccup at her side. It was a smile that she had been wearing since she went to bed the night before, so excited by the previous day's events that she had almost forgotten to change out of her new clothes. Not that she would have minded.

Looking down at her new clothes, she couldn't help but let out a small giggle. Hiccup had been right on the money when he said that she didn't enjoy wearing dresses and the other frilly things that came with being a lady of the Highlands. The freedom and simplicity of the Viking style was much to her tastes. She would have to thank Fishlegs when she finally got a chance to meet him.

Glancing over at Hiccup, she smirked as he quickly turned his head away, the blush on his face making it evident he had been watching her. Things had been slightly awkward since he had come to wake her up that morning, now doubt due to the last second kiss she had given him the night before. Merida still wasn't entirely sure why she had done it, but every part of her seemed to have been urging her too and even with the awkwardness afterwards, she couldn't say that she regretted the choice.

"Sae," Merida spoke up, hoping to break the silence, "Ah ne'er did ask ye whit it is ye dae at th' smithy."

"I'm Gobber's apprentice," Hiccup stated, a confused look on his face, "I thought we went over this already."

"We did," Merida replied with a smirk, "Whit Ah meant was whit exactly dae ye dae fer him?"

"A little bit of everything, I guess" Hiccup replied with a small smile, "Repairs, crafting weapons, armor, and tools. You know, blacksmith stuff. I've made everything from broadswords to nails. Let me tell you, I make a mean nail."

"Ah'm sure ye dae," Merida giggled, causing Hiccup's cheeks to redden.

"I've also tried my hands at inventing before," Hiccup stated, "With vary degrees of success."

"Inventin'?" Merida questioned as they entered the main part of the village, "Whit kind o' thin's hae ye invented?"

"Like I said, I've had varying degrees of success," Hiccup explained, ignoring the looks that he and Merida got, "The variation running between nonfunctional to complete disaster."

"It cudnae hae been 'at bad," Merida stated as the two rounded a corner, bringing the smithy into view, the smoke rising from the chimney signaling that Gobber was already inside.

"I'm still not allowed in the woodcutter's camp after my "automatic woodchopper" almost sliced one of their heads off," Hiccup elaborated, grimacing at the memory, "And that's nothing compared to the Borer."

"Th' Borer?" Merida questioned, a look of concern on her face.

"Trust me, the less I say about that, the better," Hiccup replied as they reached the smithy and opened the door for Merida before following her in, "There are still some hard feelings over that one."

"Whit ane?" Gobber asked, not looking up from his work by the anvil.

"The Borer," Hiccup answered, causing Gobber to hiss as if he was in pain as he looked up at his apprentice, blinking in surprise as he found Merida standing in his shop.

"Princess!" he said, an alarmed look on his face as he set his work and tools aside, "Ah didnae expect tae see ye in here any time soon."

"Ah felt like visitin'," Merida replied with a shrug and a sly smirk, as Hiccup peeled off his vest and put on his heavy, leather apron "Th' woods hae been growin' dreadfully borin'."

"Understandable," Gobber said with a chuckle, before giving Merida a dramatic bow, "Welcome back tae ma humble smithy."

"It's an honor tae return," Merida giggled as she gave him a curtsy, causing Hiccup to laugh as he made his way over to the furnace.

"Ah like yer new look," Gobber complimented, indicating to Merida's new clothing, "Much more befittin'."

"Thank ye," she said with a smile, "An' thank ye fer yer gifts as well. They meant a lot tae me."

"It was nothin'," Gobber said, waving off the compliment, "I was happy tae dae it."

"Thank ye all th' same," Merida repeated, finding a stool and sitting on it.

"Sae, it seems ye an' Hiccup hae turned over a new leaf," Gobber commented, eyeing the two teens with a smile.

"Ah suppose ye can say we hae," Merida replied, looking at Hiccup and smiling shyly at him, causing the young man to blush as he pushed on the billows, stoking the flames within the furnace, "Hiccup showed me Ah was lookin' at thin's th' wrong way."

"Aye, he's been haein' 'at effect on people as o' late," Gobber commented as he turned back to his own work, causing Hiccup to glance at him and smile.

"Ye know, Gobber, Ah've been meanin' tae ask, but why dae ye speak with a Highlander accent?" Merida questioned, raising an eyebrow in Gobber's direction.

The question seemed to startle Gobber, who paused in the middle of swinging his work hammer. The question caught Hiccup's attention, causing him to spin around and stand up while rapidly glancing between Merida and Gobber. Merida's eyes widened in surprise at the Vikings' reactions before she looked over at Hiccup for any sign as to how badly she had just misspoke. Before Hiccup could do anything

though, Gobber sighed, catching both of their attentions. A thoughtful, almost forlorn expression cross Gobber's face as he placed his hammer down and lifted his head to look at Merida.

"At's because ma mother was a Highlander, princess," he explained simply.

"She was?" Merida asked in confusion, scrunching her face as she tried to decipher the meaning behind Gobber's words, "Ah hae ne'er heard o' any marriage between th' Highland Kingdoms an' Berk. At least, nae afore ma own."

As soon as her words mouth, Hiccup let out a painful hiss that told her that her words had not been chosen well.

"'At's because there werenae nae marriage between ma mother an' father," Gobber explained grimly, his expression unreadable.

"Ahâ€|Ah daenaeâ€|" Merida mumbled, not comprehending what Gobber was saying.

"Ma mother an' father did nae meet through some diplomatic treaty tae foster peace like ye an' Hiccup," Gobber elaborated, leaning against the anvil, his solemn eyes focused on her confused ones, "They met when ma father raided her village an' took her with him."

Merida gasped in shock as everything became abundantly clear to her, her eyes widening in surprise as she clasped her hands over her gaping mouth.

"Ye mean heâ€|" Merida began but trailed off, the thought to horrible to finish.

"Aye," Gobber confirmed for her, "Closest she got tae a wedding ceremony, Ah suppose. Nine moons later an' here Ah was."

"Oh Gobber, 'at's horrible!" Merida exclaimed, before realizing the kind of impact her words might have on the blacksmith, "Ah mean, nae 'at it means it was terrible ye were born, Ah was jist sayingâ€|"

"Ah understand whit ye are sayin', Princess," Gobber cut her off, holding up his good hand to stop her from continuing, "An' it doesnae hurt me none. Ah take nae pride in th' manner o' my birth or th' actions o' ma father in any circumstance."

"Itâ€|It sounds like yeâ€|didnae really like yer father," Merida commented, before flinching slightly as Hiccup spun his head around to stick her with a shocked expression, clearly surprised she had the audacity to say something like that.

"Aye, 'at's true," Gobber replied, causing Hiccup to whip his head around to point his shocked look at the blacksmith, "Ah hae nae love fer ma father, Hel take his soul. Th' only thin' th' man was ever good at was drinkin' an' beatin' on women an' children. Ah was lucky he didnae let this shop gae tae rot afore Ah inherited it. Only good thin' th' bastard ever gave tae me."

"Heâ€|he sounds like an awful man," Merida stated

sympathetically.

"He was," Gobber agreed, "Th' world was a better place after 'at Highlander shot him in th' back as he tried tae run away durin' a raid. When Ah was younger, Ah liked tae think 'at man was ma grandfather, ma mother's father, takin' vengeance."

The shop fell quite after that, Merida looking down at her hands clasped in her lap while Hiccup rubbed his arm and kicked the floor awkwardly. Gobber glanced between the two before turning his attention back to his work, picking up the metal he was working with and reheating it with the brazier before pounding on it again.

"Whit was yer mother like?" Merida questioned, bringing the clanging of hammer on metal back to a sudden stop.

"She was a kind soul," Gobber said after a moment, lowering his arm again but keeping his eyes completely focused on the anvil in front of him, "A lovin', carin' mother who ne'er held th' circumstances o' ma birth against me. She hated ma father more than anyone though. If he had had a grave, Ah'm sure she wud hae danced on it."

"Sae, ye an' her lived with yer father, like some sort o' family?" Merida asked, obviously disgusted by the idea.

"We were a family in th' basest sense," Gobber replied, picking up his work hammer and looking it over, "Ma father ran th' smithy, with me as his reluctant apprentice. Ma mother meanwhile did patchwork an' whatever odd job th' villagers wud let her dae. Nobody trusted her an' fer good reason. Ah've heard many tales aboot how she tried tae escape th' village with me when Ah was a babe, tae say nothin' aboot how many times she tried tae kill my father in his sleep. It was surprising 'at it was ultimately a raid gone bad 'at ended him, but oddly poetic in a way."

"Whit happened after he died?" Merida questioned, inching forward a little bit.

"Ah was only yer age when it happened, still in dragon trainin' with Hiccup's mother an' father—among others," Gobber said solemnly, his eyes clouding with memories which he quickly shook away, "Sae his blacksmithin' duties fell tae his so-called assistant, who in reality was ma grandfather's legitimate apprentice, an' in turn became th' man who actually taught me how tae be a blacksmith. Ma mother meanwhile enjoyed more freedom in th' village as it became clearer 'at with ma life sae firmly entrenched here, she wasnae goin' tae try an' escape any time soon. She was ne'er fully accepted as a member o' th' village, as ye will nae doubt be completely unsurprised tae hear, but she was able tae become a cook fer th' many feasts at th' Great Hall."

There was a pause as a sad look crossed Gobber's face, still examining his hammer as if by looking at it, he could look into the past.

"She took sick an' died nae long after ma twentieth year," Gobber spoke up after a moment, "They wudnae burn her because she wasnae a Viking, sae Ah took her out into th' forest an' buried her th' way she told me th' Highlanders did."

Finally, Gobber lifted his eyes and looked at the two teens, who were looking back at him with matching, sorrowful expressions. Seeing this, an embarrassed look crossed Gobber's face, indicating that he had revealed more than he had previously meant to.

"Anyway," he said quickly, scratching his nose awkwardly, "Ma mother was th' ane responsible fer raisin' me, sae Ah kind o' picked up th' accent from her. Ma father hated it, sae Ah let it stick as a way tae spite him."

"Ah-Ah see," Merida replied, wringing her hands as she tried to think of what to say, "Gobber Ah-"

"Daenae," Gobber cut her off, startling her, "Jist let it lay, Princess."

Merida slowly nodded, turning her gaze away from Gobber, who looked over at Hiccup.

"Daenae ye hae work ye shud be doin', lad?" Gobber questioned, raising an eyebrow at his apprentice.

"R-Right," Hiccup replied, quickly turning back to the furnace, "I'll get on that."

Gobber nodded in approval, turning his attention back to his work, filling the smithy with the sounds of clanging metal as Hiccup and Merida glanced worriedly at each other.

Later,

The sun slowly began to peak outside as the noise from work filled the shop, Hiccup holding the pommel of a broadsword as Gobber beat on it mercilessly with a hammer, red hot sparks shooting off of it with every blow.

Merida, meanwhile, had taken a place at Hiccup's design table, flipping through one of his sketchbooks. Merida smiled as she looked at the various designs and drawings Hiccup had sketched on the white pages. She was surprised at how talented he was at the art, adding to the rapidly growing list of skills the young man seemed to possess. Turning a page, Merida's smile grew as she found the sketch he must have drawn while designing her new bow, accompanied by drawings of the carvings he had done on the bow as well as ideas he had scrapped for the design.

Merida figured that would be the end of the sketchbook, but as she moved to close it, she noticed markings on the next page. Flipping it over, her eyes widened in surprise as she let out a small gasp, the sound of which was covered up by the clanging of metal being worked not far away. On the page a drawing had been sketched. A drawing that was clearly of her. Merida's cheeks began to turn pink as she looked at the depiction of her in one of her dresses, her old bow in her hands and an unseen wind blowing through her untamed mane of hair. She was shocked at the level of detail that had been placed in the drawing, especially because Hiccup had to have done it all from memory. From the individual strands of her hair, to the look of determination on her face, to the fletching of the arrow, the individual pieces built up to a picture that simply took Merida's breath away.

Her smile growing as her blush deepened, Merida leaned down to get a closer look at the drawing, before a loud knock came from the smithy door. Merida let out a squeak of surprise, quickly slamming the sketchbook shut as Hiccup and Gobber looked up from their work. Merida discreetly pushed the sketchbook away as Hiccup made his way towards the door, Gobber rolling his eyes behind the Viking teen in exasperation.

"You alright, Merida?" Hiccup asked, raising an eyebrow at her as he walked by on the way to the door, "Your face is a littleâ€|red."

"Oh, is it?" Merida questioned, feeling her blush glowing brighter, as she pulled at the collar of her shirt with one hand and fanned herself with the other, "Ah'm alright. It's jist a wee hot in here is all."

"Maybe you should grab some air," Hiccup suggested, "Just let me take care of this. I think I know who it is."

Pulling the door open, Hiccup stared blankly at Fishlegs who was standing nervously just behind the door.

"Hey, Fishlegs," Hiccup greeted, raising an eyebrow at his friend, "What are you doing?"

"I'm here to pick up that new warhammer for my dad," Fishlegs explained, "Is it alright if I come in?"

"Fishlegs, we've already been over this," Hiccup sighed exasperatedly, "You're not banned anymore."

"You sure?" Fishlegs questioned uncertainly.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Hiccup replied with a chuckle, before stepping aside and holding the door open so Fishlegs could enter. Fishlegs smiled as he entered the building, quickly looking around before his eyes widened in surprise as they fell on Merida.

"P-Princess Merida!" Fishlegs choked in surprise, fidgeting nervously before deciding to bow to her, "I-I didn't expect you to be here."

"It's alright Fishlegs, ye daenae hae tae dae any o' 'at," she said with a chuckle, standing from the stool, "Besides, Ah'm nae much o' a princess here anyway."

"Alright," Fishlegs chuckled nervously, "I see you got the clothes my mother made. Do you like them?"

"Ah love them," Merida replied, playing with the hem of her skirt a bit, "Be sure tae give yer mother ma thanks."

"I will," Fishlegs replied with a smile, "My mom was really excited to be making clothes for a princess. It was all I could do to make sure she didn't tell the entire village. My dad thought it was a bad idea, but my mom just ignored him."

"Good on her," Merida replied with a chuckle, before a though

occurred to her, "Ye know, we were ne'er formally introduced, were we?"

"I guess not," Fishlegs replied with a chuckle of his own.

"Merida O'DunBroch," Merida stated, holding out her hand for him to shake.

"Fishlegs Ingerman," Fishlegs replied, shaking her hand with a smile.

"Ye know, Ah'm surprised ye an' Gobber werenae at ma party yesterday," Merida commented.

"Oh, that's because Hiccup wanted it to be a "private affair", as he put it," Fishlegs stated with a smirk.

"Och, did he now?" Merida questioned, turning to Hiccup and raising an eyebrow at him, causing the young man to blush.

"'At's enough fraternizin', ye lot," Gobber stated as he walked over with a larger, metal war hammer, "This is a place o' business."

"Sorry, Gobber," Fishlegs apologized, before producing a bag of coins and handing them to Gobber.

"Whit are ye up tae today, Fishlegs?" Merida asked as Gobber hobbled away to count the payment.

"Well, after this, I'll be done with helping my dad," Fishlegs replied, "Why?"

Instead of answering him, Merida turned to address Hiccup,

"When are ye done with work?" she asked him.

"We should be done for the day after we finish shaping this sword," Hiccup answered.

Nodding, Merida turned her attention back to Fishlegs.

"Why daenae ye gae brin' 'at tae yer father an' then meet us back here," Merida stated, motioning towards the hammer, "Hiccup shud be done by th' time ye get back. After 'at we can all spend some time together."

"Sounds good," Fishlegs agreed, before hefting the hammer onto his shoulder and exiting the smithy. Merida turned and looked back at Hiccup, who was smiling warmly at her.

"Well, danae jist stand there, get ae work," Merida ordered, making a shooin' motion at him, "We daenae hae all day, after all."

Hiccup could only chuckle and hold his hands up in a helpless gesture as he returned to work, Merida smiling at him as he went.

Later,

The mid-afternoon sun cut through the dark green canopy of the woods, covering the ground in long shadows. Merida, Hiccup and Fishlegs made their way through the woods, chatting idly with each other. Merida was in the lead, her new bow and quiver slung over her shoulders.

"Ah still cannae believe 'at Gobber is half-Highlander," Merida said as she hopped over a rock, "Ah mean, Ah guess Ah shud hae been able tae figure it out, but it jist ne'er occurred tae me 'at something like 'at happened."

"It happens a lot actually," Fishlegs explained, ducking beneath a low hanging branch, "Pretty much every Viking village does it to some degree. I've heard it called 'bringing in new blood.'"

"'At'sâ€|horrible," Merida whispered, pausing to look back at Fishlegs with a look of horror and disgust, "Ye're sayin' this happens a lot here in Berk?"

"Not a lot here, just in Viking tribes in general," Hiccup explained, walking up next to her and placing his hand on her shoulder, "Berk tends to be a lot more insular and take veryâ€|unkindly to outsiders."

"Aye, Ah've noticed," Merida replied grimly.

"So Gobber's case is kind of a strange one," Hiccup continued, squeezing her shoulder to reassure her, "From what I know, a lot of people gave him a hard time over it."

"'At's sae terrible," Merida sighed, shaking her head sadly as the three of them continued on deeper into the forest, "Ah daenae understand why people always hate somethin' 'at's different."

"I think it's because new things, things they don't understand, scares people," Hiccup explained as they reached a small creek, over which a fallen tree was laid. Merida hopped up onto it, holding her arms to her side to retain her balance as she began to cross, Hiccup and Fishlegs following her.

"People don't like to be scared, so they treat the new thing hostilely," Hiccup continued as they reached the other side and hopped off, "It's just kind of how people work."

"Doesnae make it right," Merida commented, glancing over her shoulder at Hiccup.

"I know," Hiccup agreed with a shrug, "Just an explanation is all."

"Wish we cud dae somethin' fer Gobber," Merida said with a sigh as she stepped over a patch of brush, "Ah mean did ye notice somethin' about his accent?"

Hiccup paused and looked at Fishlegs, who shrugged.

"No, not really," Hiccup admitted, stepping over the brush, Fishlegs following him.

"He sounds exactly like Lord Macintosh," Merida explained, "Ah wonder if Gobber's mother was from Macintosh lands. Maybe she was even a member o' th' clan!"

"Maybe," Hiccup said with another shrug of his shoulders, while Fishlegs began to look around at the surrounding area in confusion, "But how could we ever figure that out?"

Merida sighed, pushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, realizing she didn't have an answer to that. As she did, Fishlegs continued to look around in confusion, spinning in place as he lifted a finger, signaling there was something he couldn't quite figure out.

"Uh guys," he said, catching Merida and Hiccup's attentions, "Where are we?"

At the question, Merida and Hiccup blinked in confusion, before looking around at the surrounding area before realizing that they were also didn't recognize the patch of woods they were in.

"I'm not sure," Hiccup replied, "I don't think I've ever been in this part of the woods either. Have you Merida? You've been exploring a lot lately."

"Nae, Ah daenae think Ah've been in this part either," Merida admitted, turning in place looking in every direction, "Dae either o' ye remember which way th' village was?"

Hiccup looked at Fishlegs who grimaced and shrugged his shoulders, causing Hiccup to turn back to Merida and shake his head.

"Damn," Merida swore, before glancing around, "Well, Ah guess we shud jist start walkin' until we get our bearins back. It's a small island after all"

The others nodded and followed Merida as she pushed her way through some brush. The path was hard going at first, with thorns and briars grabbing at their clothes and occasionally scratching their skin. Eventually though, the brush opened up, making their going easier. As they continued, Merida suddenly felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up as a chill went through her body.

"Did ye lads feel 'at?" she asked, pausing and looking over her shoulder at the boys with wide eyes, the boys nodding in reply.

"What was that?" Fishlegs questioned.

"Ah daenae know," Merida replied, shaking her head before turning around and continuing through the brush.

Brushing some bushes aside, Merida revealed a large clearing on the other side. The three teenagers gasped in shock and awe as they stepped into the clearing, their eyes widening in surprise. The clearing was dominated by a dozen large standing stones, spaced equally from each other and forming a perfect circle. The stones each stood over ten feet tall and were seemingly cut from solid rock before being placed in their current positions. Some were topped with smaller rocks, balanced on the top. There were even two stones placed

close together, holding up a third one and forming an arch. The rocks seemed immeasurably old, worn by weather and wind, with moss covering the bottom of most of them.

"Wow," Hiccup said as he stepped out into the clearing with the others.

"Sun above," Merida whispered in awe, before turning to Hiccup, "Ye didnae tell me there was a standin' stone circle on th' island."

"That's because there isn't," Fishlegs spoke up, looking around as they crept closer to the stone circle, "At least, there shouldn't. Vikings have lived on this island for generations, they've explored every inch of this island. I think they would have found this before."

"An' yet, here it is," Merida stated, reaching out and touching one of the stones, feeling its cold, smooth surface.

"And yet, here it is," Fishlegs repeated with a nod.

"But why is it here?" Hiccup questioned.

"Well, standin' stone circles are sacred places," Merida explained, "They're supposed tae have a connection tae th' world o' th' Fey."

"Fey?" Hiccup questioned.

"Spirits," Fishlegs elaborated, "Fairy folk."

As Fishlegs and Hiccup talked, Merida edged closer to the circle. Taking a deep breath, she crossed the invisible threshold into the inside of the circle. As she did, she felt a chill run down her spine.

"Merida," Hiccup spoke up, looking at her in concern, "Are you alright?"

"Aye," Merida replied, looking over her shoulder at him and giving him a small smile, "It's jist 'at-"

Merida was interrupted by a strange sound that suddenly came from behind her, causing her to stop cold, looking at the boys were staring at something behind her, their eyes wide in surprise.

Before Merida could say anything more, the sound came again, sounding almost like the murmuring of a child. Turning around, Merida found a small, blue specter hovering the air a few inches from her face, glowing blue like an ethereal flame. It murmured at her again, causing her eyes to go wide and her jaw to go slack from shock.

"W-What is it?" Fishlegs whispered hesitantly.

"Ahâ€¦Ah think it's a wisp," Merida said, her eyes completely focused on the creature before her, which only seemed interested in watching her.

"What's a wisp?" Hiccup questioned, edging hesitantly towards her.

"It's a type o' Fey," Merida replied, as she hesitantly began to lift her hand out to touch the wisp, "It's said they can lead ye-Oh!"

Just as her fingers were about to touch it, the wisp suddenly vanished in a puff of smoke, giving another murmur as it went. The others looked at around to see if they could find where the wisp had gone, only for another murmur to catch their attention as the wisp reappeared a few feet away near the center of the circle. Looking at it, they saw that it was moving its arms in a way that made it look like it was beckoning them.

"â€|tae yer destiny," Merida finished, her eyes wide.

"What's it doing?" Fishlegs questioned.

"I think it wants us to follow it," Hiccup stated. Before the boys could say anything more, Merida began walking towards the wisp.

"Merida!" Hiccup whispered harshly, holding his hand out in futile attempt to stop her, "What are you doing?"

"It wants us tae follow it, doesnae it?" Merida replied, glancing over her shoulder at Hiccup.

"That doesn't mean we should!" Hiccup stated nervously.

"Oh come, Hiccup, where's yer sense o' adventure?" Merida teased, smirking at him.

"Back in the village, where it's safe," Hiccup deadpanned, hesitantly following Merida, who chuckled and shook her head at him, before turning her attention back to the wisp which was still beckoning them. Fishlegs meanwhile gulped nervously before following as well.

As they got closer to it, Merida reached out and tried to touch the wisp again, only for it vanish a second time. A second passed before it reappeared on the opposite side of the stone circle. This time, however, it wasn't alone. Behind it, forming a line down a previously unseen path, were dozens of other wisps, each of them beckoning the three teenagers to follow them. The three of them stared at the wisps in amazement.

"Alright," Hiccup relented, not taking his eyes away from the wisps, "Maybe we should follow them."

Merida peeked over at him and smirked before she began to follow after the wisps, each one disappearing as she drew close to it, the two boys trailing behind her. The path led through a dark, tightly packed stretch off woods, the branches of the gnarled trees forming a canopy above them, making the path seem like a tunnel. Eventually, the path ended at clearing, Hiccup noticing the tunnel exit passing under the exposed roots of a large and ancient tree.

As they entered the clearing, the wisps led them to the right, where

the three saw a small cottage. The cottage looked like it had been built into the hillside, the roof actually being a grassy knoll that sat upon the house, a ring of white stone's designating the edge of the roof. The walls of the cottage were made of hewn, white stone, with the only break in their uniformity being a wooden door in an alcove.

"Lads?" Merida spoke up, catching Hiccup and Fishlegs' attention, "Is there supposed tae be someone livin' this far out in th' woods?"

"Not that I ever heard of," Hiccup replied, looking at the cottage in confusion.

"Me either," Fishlegs agreed, scratching his head.

Slowly, Merida began to inch forward, following the wisps as they continued to beckon her towards the cottage, the boys following her hesitantly. As Merida reached the door to the cottage, the wisps vanished all together, leaving her at a loss to what she should do. Looking at the door, Merida carefully raised her hand, curling her fingers into a fist as she prepared to knock.

"Hello," a voice said from behind them, causing the three teenagers to jump and let out simultaneous cries of surprise.

Spinning around, the three found an old woman standing behind them. In fact, she looked positively ancient. She had greyish white hair which swept away from her face in an almost solid shape that ran down her to the middle of her back. Her fair skin was wrinkled with innumerable frown lines, crow's feet and other assorted signs of aging. She stood with an extremely hunched posture, resting most of her weight on the gnarled walking stick she had. She wore a simple, dark green dress under a lighter colored shawl. A mismatched pair of earrings hung from her lobes and Merida couldn't help but notice the few white whiskers that grew from her chin. A sleek black raven sat on her shoulder, eyeing them curiously.

"Hi," Hiccup said after a moment, wiggling his fingers at her.

"My, I don't get many visitors," the woman said with a thick accent that Merida couldn't identify, "Vat are all you young folk doing out here?"

"Um, wellâ€¦you seeâ€¦" Hiccup mumbled as he tried to come up with an explanation.

"We gotâ€¦" Fishlegs began, nervously playing with his hands.

"â€¦lost," Merida finished, "An' then we kind o'â€¦"

"Followed zee lights," the woman stated, smiling knowingly at the three of them, causing them to look at her in surprise.

"How did you know that?" Hiccup questioned.

"I'm an old voman, dearie," the woman replied, her smile growing, "I have my ways."

"Who are you anyway?" Fishlegs questioned.

"Just a simple woodcarver," the woman replied, moving past the three of them as they stepped aside, allowing her to open the door to the cottage and step inside, "Come in, vill you?"

"Hiccup," Merida whispered as they moved to follow the old woman, "Whit is 'at accent she has?"

"Iâ€¦I think its Old Norse," Hiccup replied hesitantly as they stepped inside, "It's been awhile since I heard anyone speak with that accent though."

Inside, the cottage had a very comfortable, if cluttered, feeling to it. Most of the room just passed the door was filled with wood carvings of all sorts of sizes and designs sitting on tables and shelves throughout the building. A work table sat not far away from them, covered in wood shavings, sawdust, woodworking tools and half-finished carvings.

The next room was apparently some sort of kitchen, dominated mostly by a large, black iron cauldron that sat in the center of the room, filled with some unidentifiable liquid. The shelves in this room held vials and jars in which there were more ingredients then any of them could reasonably identify. A small wooden table, surrounded by four chairs sat next to the cauldron.

Off to the side they could see a door leading to another room, where they could just make out a bed, signifying the room's use.

"Come in, come in," the woman beckoned, "Hafe a seat."

"Thank ye, uhâ€¦" Merida began to say before thought occurred to her, "Ye ne'er did tell us yer name."

"You nefer asked," the woman replied cryptically as Hiccup and Fishlegs took seats as well, the three teenagers sharing confused glances.

"What is your name?" Hiccup questioned.

"I've had many names ofer zee years, dear boy," the woman replied enigmatically as she eased herself into the last chair, "But you? You can call me Hilde."

"Wellâ€¦Hildeâ€¦I'm-" Hiccup began but the old woman held up her hand to quite him.

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock zee Zird," Hilde stated smiling at Hiccup's shocked expression, "I know vho you are."

She turned to look at Merida and Fishlegs, who were also looking at her in astonishment.

"I know vho you both of you are too," Hilde stated, "Fishlegs Ingerman and Princess Merida O'DunBroch."

"Howâ€¦How dae ye know all o' this?" Merida asked in confusion.

"Like I said," Hilde replied with a shrug, "An old voman has her vays."

The three teens looked at each other in confusion again, before Merida turned her attention back to Hilde.

"How did ye know about th' wisps?" Merida questioned.

"I hafe lived in this forest for a fery long time," Hilde explained, "I hafe learned to interact with all manner of creature that calls it home. In schort, zee visps are my friends and I zeirs."

"You're friends with the wisps?" Hiccup asked in shock, "I didn't even know they existed until today."

"As you vill no doubt discover, Reiter, zere is much in zis world you do not know about," Hidle stated warmly.

"Why did they brin' us here?" Merida questioned.

"Vhy does anyone do anyzing?" Hilde replied with a shrug, "Because zey wanted to."

"But Ah grew up hearin' tales o' how wisps were connected tae fate," Merida said, clearly unsatisfied with the woman's answer, "Ah heard they lead a person tae their destiny."

"I vouldn't know anyzing about destiny or fate, Jager," Hidle stated with a laugh, "I just know zee little creatures bring people to me from time to time."

"Did they tell you about us?" Hiccup questioned, "Is that how you knew our names?"

"Names are not hard to find, Reiter," Hilde explained, "I know your names and so much more."

"More?" Hiccup asked.

"Kind says zee trees," she replied, smiling at him, "Clever says zee wind. Oh yes, Reiter, I know much more zan your name."

The three teenagers looked at her in shock, before Fishlegs finally managed to find his voice after a long while of silence.

"Whatâ€¦what are you?" Fishlegs asked.

"Just a voodcarfer, Leser," Hilde replied with a smile as she pushed herself to her feet, "Just a voodcarfer. Now, vould you three like some dinner?"

Later,

"Thank ye fer dinner, Hilde," Merida thanked the older woman as she, Hiccup and Fishlegs stood outside Hilde's cottage, "It was delicious."

"You're too kind, Jager," Hilde replied with a smile, waving the

complement away, "I'm just glad to have someone to cook dinner for again. Gods know zis one doesn't appreciate it."

As she spoke, she indicated to the raven sitting on her shoulder, causing it to caw as if offended, earning chuckles from the three teenagers.

"I guess we should be getting back now," Hiccup said, stretching his arms above his head and yawning.

"The only problem is we still don't know which way is back," Fishlegs pointed out, causing the other two to sigh as they remembered.

"Oh, zat's no problem, dearies," Hilde said, leading them away from her house before turning them around to face the forest. As she did, they noticed a path leading away that they had not seen before, cutting through the trees and brush.

"Just follow zat path and it will lead you shtraight to zee village," Hilde said from behind them, "And don't be schy about coming back, I do love company."

"But Hilde how dae we find ourâ€¦!" Merida began to say, turning around to talk to the older woman, but froze in her tracks as her eyes widened in shock. The boys noticed and turned around as well, shock striking them as well. The old woman had vanished, along with her cottage. Instead, the three now stood back at the standing stone circle, directly in front of the arch. A howling wind swept over the clearing as the three teenagers stood stock still in the moonlight.

"Well," Fishlegs spoke up after a moment, "I'm done."

With that, the Viking boy turned around and began walking down the path, clearly restraining himself from flat out running away. Hiccup moved to follow him, but noticed Merida continued to stand where she was, looking at the standing stones with a mixture of shock and awe.

"Merida," he said gently, but received no response, "Merida, come on."

Trying to think of a way to catch her attention, Hiccup looked down at Merida's hands, which hung loosely at her sides. Flexing his own hand nervously, Hiccup bit his lip in indecision before taking a calming breath and reached out to take her hand in his. The feel of skin upon her own seemed to snap Merida back to reality, her eyes blinking rapidly as if she were coming out of a slumber. Slowly, she turned and looked down at Hiccup's hand holding hers, before bringing her eyes back up to look into his.

"Come on, let's go home," he said, smirking at her, his nerves calming as he looked into her eyes, "I'm sure we'll be able to find her again."

A blush colored Merida's cheeks for a moment, before she smiled at him, turning to face him as she interlocked their fingers.

"Alright," Merida replied, stepping up beside him as they began to

make their way down the path, their hands remaining clasped until they had reached home.

A/N: I had a lot of fun writing this chapter. Not super serious, just a lot of my favorite characters interacting, as well as building the setting a little more. And I got to introduce the witch, who was an absolute blast to write. I changed her to a less comedic character, so I hope you guys liked her, because she's very important to the story. Also hope you guys liked my take on Gobber's history. Either way, as always, feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

12. Toil and Trouble

****Chapter 12: Toil and Trouble****

Astrid was not a morning person. Not by any stretch of the imagination. So, when the morning sunlight filtered in through her window, splashing across her face, she growled as if she had been personally insulted, which as far as she was concerned, she had. Rolling over, she attempted to block out the rising sun and the coming of morning, but try as she might, she could not fall back to sleep. Sighing, glared at her bedroom wall for a few moments before deciding to get up.

Throwing her blankets off, Astrid rolled out of bed and quickly got dressed. Slipping on her boots, Astrid hustled down the stairs of her simple home, planning to grab some food from the kitchen and be on her way. She figured if she had to be up, she might as well get started on the day.

Her mother apparently had other ideas though.

"You're up early," Bertha said from her seat at their simple kitchen table, watching the dying embers of the fire from the night before in the fireplace.

"Not by choice," Astrid replied gruffly as she began looking around the kitchen for food, eventually settling upon an apple, "Going to head out, get an early start on my chores."

"Actually," Bertha said, holding up a hand and stopping Astrid as she was reaching for the door, "Sit down. I wanted to talk to you."

"Can this wait?" Astrid asked in confusion, indicating towards the door, "I'd rather get this stuff done."

"Sit down," Bertha repeated, fixing Astrid with a cold, hard look. Astrid continued looking at her mother in confusion but followed her request and sat down in another rickety wooden chair facing the older woman.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Astrid questioned, raising an eyebrow at Bertha.

"You need to leave the Highlander girl alone," Bertha stated simply.

"What?" Astrid asked incredulously, not understanding what her mother

was saying, "Why the Hel would you want me to do that?"

"You're causing trouble that the village doesn't need," Bertha replied calmly.

"I'm causing trouble!" Astrid repeated, letting out a shocked laugh, leaning forward and placing her hands flat against the table, "You think I'm the one causing trouble and not the sissy princess prancing around and acting like she's better than us!?"

"Listen, I know you have a problem with Highlandersâ€¦" Bertha began to say but was cut off by Astrid banging her fist against the table.

"I have a problem with Highlanders!?" Astrid shouted, glaring at Bertha, as she stood up, knocking her chair over and causing it to clatter onto the floor, "You say that like this whole village doesn't have a problem with Highlanders! Like you don't have a problem with Highlanders! What, because the chief is marrying his sniveling weakling of a son to their vapid brat of a princess means you're going to play nice with people who killed my father!?"

"Don't you dare suggest that I have forgotten what they did to your father!" Bertha roared back, standing up and knocking over her chair as well, meeting Astrid's glare with one of her own, "The difference is that I can see the bigger picture, unlike you."

"What bigger picture?" Astrid said, leaning back and looking at Bertha like she was stupid, "What are you talking about?"

"What you're failing to understand is your actions are putting a heavy strain on this alliance," Bertha explained, "If you don't stop this, you could cause this entire alliance to come crashing down around us."

"Well, what if that's a good thing!?" Astrid asked angrily, "We've done fine on our own for generations. Why do we need their help!?"

"Because our enemies are closing in on us from every side!" Bertha exclaimed, "Every dragon attack or Vandal raid leaves us a little weaker, a little more hurt, while they seem to be without limit. If we do not do something we will be overrun. And you would have us turn an ally into an enemy?"

Astrid said nothing, choosing instead to cross her arms and glare at the table.

"You're a smart girl, you don't need me to puzzle this out," Bertha sighed as she walked over to her daughter's side of the table and placed a hand on her shoulder, "I'm not asking you to be friends with her; I'm not even asking you to like her. What I am asking you to do is lay off her, and make sure you're friends do as well."

Astrid said nothing, continuing to look at the table, prompting Bertha to reach down and cup her daughter's chin, lifting it so she could look the teenager in the eyes.

"Your father would be proud of you for trying to defend his memory," Bertha stated, giving Astrid a smile, "But I think he would be more

proud if you worked to defend the village he died for."

"Okay," Astrid relented, sighing and averting her gaze.

"There's my girl," Bertha replied proudly, letting go of Astrid's chin before nodding to the door, "Now, go take care of your chores."

Astrid nodded and made her way out of the house, grabbing the apple she had been planning on eating before leaving. She sighed as she stood on her porch, looking up at the sky as she palmed the apple. Looking up at the sky, she squinted angrily at the sun, grumbling to herself as she made her way towards the village.

No, Astrid was not a morning person.

Later,

A few days had passed since the three teenagers' encounter with Hilde deep within the woods. Merida had spent much of her time combing the forest with Angus, accompanied by Hiccup and Fishlegs when they could spare the time. Every time resulted in nothing. No wisps, no standing stones, no old woman in the forest. At times, Merida found herself wondering if she and the boys had imagined the whole thing, but in reality, she knew that the old woman was somehow keeping them from finding her and would only reveal herself again when she wanted to.

"So you think she's hiding her house from us?" Hiccup questioned as the three of them made their way through the village, cocking a questioning eyebrow at her.

"Aye," she said plainly, not understanding his questioning attitude.

"And you think she hid the standing stones somehow too?" Hiccup continued to ask.

"Aye," Merida continued looking at him in confusion, "Whit, dae ye nae believe me?"

"No, it's just I think it all sounds tooâ€¦" Hiccup trailed off, waving his hand through the air as he tried to find the right words for what he was thinking, "Magic?"

"Aye, 'at's whit Ah'm sayin', she's usin' magic," Merida stated, giving Hiccup a dubious look, "Are ye sayin' ye daenae believe in magic?"

"I'm not a big fan of believing in things I can't see with my own eyes," Hiccup explained.

"Well, don't let Gothi here you say that," Fishlegs commented.

"Aye, an' daes 'at mean ye didnae believe th' story Ah told ye aboot Rapunzel?" Merida question, looking at him crossly, "An' ye saw whit happened when we left Hilde's, ye were there! How else dae ye explain 'at!?"

"I don't know!" Hiccup said in surprise, holding up his hands

defensively, "I'm just saying maybe we shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"Wow, you're first disagreement," Fishleg's commented with a chuckle, "Now you guys really are a couple."

The comment caused Merida and Hiccup to blush bright red as their voices died in their throats. They looked at each other, causing their faces to redden even further, before quickly looking away, Merida crossing her arms over her chest and looking at the ground, her hair curtaining around her face while Hiccup chose to look off into the distance, scratching the back of his neck. Fishleg's covered his mouth as he chortled happily to himself.

After an awkward moment, Hiccup began to chuckle too, quickly followed by Merida before all three of them were laughing openly. Smiling, Merida and Hiccup turned to look at each other.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that," Hiccup apologized, "I mean I didn't believe in wisps until a few days ago. What do I know about magic?"

"Ah'm sorry too, Ah shudnae hae snapped at ye," Merida replied, slowly holding out her hand towards him. His smile growing, Hiccup reached out and took it into his, their fingers intertwining. The movement had become more natural for them over the past few days. Sometimes they found themselves not even talking to one another, just sitting and enjoying the feel of each other's hands in their own. They looked into each other's eyes for a few moments, their smiles growing as their cheeks continued to glow pink.

"Aw, isn't that cute," a voice that put all three of them instantly on edge mocked, "They're holding hands."

All three of the turned and glared at Snotlout, who was approaching them along with Astrid, Tuffnut and Ruffnut.

"What do you want, Snotlout?" Hiccup questioned as Merida glared at Astrid.

"Just saw you and your lady friend, and decided to say hi," Snotlout explained with a shrug, before glancing at Merida, "And the princess was here too."

Fishlegs bristled under the insult, glaring at Snotlout and clenching his hands into fists, earning a snicker from the boy.

"What's the matter, Fishlegs?" Snotlout sneered at the larger boy, "Is it that time of the month again?"

The comment caused Astrid and Merida to abruptly break from their glaring contest to turn their ire towards Snotlout, Ruffnut throwing in a glare of her own as well, all of which the boy remained oblivious to as he continued to sneer at Fishlegs. Tuffnut chuckled at the joke, causing the three girls to turn their glares towards him, successfully cowing the lanky boy into silence.

Shaking her head, Astrid turned and looked at Merida, quickly glancing her over, raising an eyebrow as she did.

"Where did you get those clothes?" Astrid questioned.

"They were a gift," Merida explained, narrowing her eyes as she looked at Astrid, "Ma birthday was a few days ago."

"So what, you think you're one of us now?" Astrid asked, her frown deepening, "It would take a Hel of a lot more than that to make you one of us, Highlander."

"Ah ne'er said Ah wanted tae be a Viking," Merida stated, her fingers clenching into a fist.

"Oh, now we're not good enough for you, huh?" Astrid asked, taking a step forward, her friends grinning at her. Merida moved to step towards Astrid, but was stopped when Hiccup, his hand still entwined with hers, tugged her back, pulling the redhead off balance and stepping between her and the Viking girl. Astrid gave Hiccup a bemused smile as she raised her eyebrow at him as Merida looked at the back of his head in surprise.

"Fighting your girlfriend's battles for her, shrimp?" Astrid questioned, causing Snotlout and the others to chuckle.

"No, I'm trying to make sure there's not a battle at all," Hiccup replied, his gaze locking with Astrid's as he gave Merida's hand a squeeze, "These fights we all keep having aren't helping anyone. They have to stop. I don't know about you, but I don't want a repeat of what happened in the forest a month ago."

Astrid narrowed her eyes at Hiccup as she clenched her hands into fists. Who did he think he was, telling her what to do? If she wanted to fight the stupid brat then she would. Then, all of a sudden, what her mother had told her that morning came flooding back to her. She almost let her emotions get the better of her again. Here she was picking fights in the street after her mother had made it abundantly clear that it was a bad idea. Gods, what was she, five? Meanwhile, Hiccup managed to keep his cool, thinking of the village before himself. If there was one thing she wouldn't stand for, it would be looking like a fool next to Hiccup the Useless.

"Yeah," Astrid agreed neutrally, shooting a glance towards Merida and subconsciously rubbing a spot on her face where the other girl had hit her, "I suppose we don't want that."

"What!?" Snotlout exclaimed, as the twins looked at her in confusion, "What the Hel do you mean!?"

"Look, Snotlout, unlike some people," Astrid said while pointedly looking at Hiccup and Merida, "We're going to be going into dragon training soon. We can't be going around picking fights with other people in the village, no matter who they are."

Looking over towards Snotlout, Astrid smiled.

"Besides," she stated, "Didn't the runt kick your ass once already? You so eager for a repeat performance?"

"Probably not," Ruffnut spoke up with a chuckle elbowing her brother in the stomach, "Seeing as they lied about it afterwards too."

The girls laughed as Tuffnut looked at the ground in embarrassment, rubbing the spot where his sister had hit him. Snotlout, meanwhile, visibly seethed, grinding his teeth together as his fists shook with barely controlled rage. Hearing more laughter, he glanced over at the other three, seeing Merida laughing as she beamed at Hiccup, who smiled sheepishly back at her. That was the last straw for Snotlout and he began stomping towards Hiccup, his face red from a mixture of anger and humiliation.

"You think that's funny, wimp!?" Snotlout snapped, pointing his finger at Hiccup as he stomped towards his cousin, "I'll show you something funny!"

Before he could reach Hiccup though, Merida suddenly stepped between them, pushing Hiccup back as she glared at Snotlout.

"What? The runt sending a princess to fight his battles now?" Snotlout mocked, chuckling to himself.

"Nae. Like Astrid said, Hiccup already whooped ye ance," Merida replied evenly, earning a glare from Snotlout, "Ah'm jist hopin' tae get a crack at ye, seein' as Ah'm th' anly ane o' us three 'at haenae got a chance tae knock ye on yer arse, ye simperin' lowlife."

"Oooooo I'm so scared," Snotlout mocked, rolling his eyes and making a face at Merida, causing her icy blue eyes to narrow, "Please don't hurt me, little princess!"

"I wouldn't get too cocky, Snotlout," Astrid stated, "She's tougher than she looks."

Merida glanced at Astrid, raising an eyebrow at the other girl, who only shrugged in reply.

"What, are you her best friend now, or something?" Snotlout questioned, turning to look at Astrid.

"Hardly," Astrid replied, glaring at Snotlout, "Just trying to keep you from making a bigger fool of yourself than you already have."

"Whatever," Snotlout said, waving his hand dismissively at Astrid while taking a step away from Merida, "I have better things to do than hang around with you losers. After all, I'm the one who's going to be training to kill dragons, while you, cuz?"

Snotlout sneered as his eyes met with Hiccup, who glared back at him.

"You're going to get to make the sword I do it with," Snotlout stated, his smile growing as he saw Hiccup's face fall. He turned his gaze towards Merida, who had taken a step towards him as she continued to glare.

"As for you, Princess," Snotlout said, leering at her, taking a step back towards her "Once you get tired of this loser, you know where to find me. I'm sure I can show you a good time."

As Hiccup bristled angrily, Snotlout reached out and attempted to cup

Merida's chin.

"I wonder if what they say about redhead's is true?" he stated.

Before he could touch her, Merida hand snapped out and grabbed his wrist before giving it a hard twist. As Snotlout let out a cry of pain, Merida punched him hard in the face, sending the Viking boy falling to the ground as she let go of his hand.

"It is," Merida replied calmly, bending over so she could get closer to Snotlout, who sat on the ground in a daze, "Daenae ever try tae touch me again, Snotface."

Snotlout looked at her dumbly for a few moments before bringing his hand up to his nose, which was beginning to trickle blood. Seeing this, he suddenly seemed to snap back to reality, glaring at Merida as she smirked back at him. Growling in anger, he scrambled to his feet as Merida took a few steps backwards, still smirking at him.

"You little bi-" Snotlout began as he tried to lunge at Merida, but was stopped when Astrid stepped in front of him, placing her hands against his shoulders and catching him before he could get any closer to her.

"Whoa there," Astrid said, as Snotlout stumbled to a stop, "It's over. That's all three of them now that have knocked you on your ass. I warned you about making a fool out of yourself and now you have. Walk it off before you do something worse."

"Are you kidding me!?" Snotlout shouted in Astrid's face.

"No, I am not kidding you," Astrid growled, reaching down and grabbed Snotlout's chin with her hand, squishing his cheeks together so his lips became comically puckered, as she glared into his eyes, "And if I ever hear you talking like that to another girl again, I'll do a lot worse than the princess ever could to you. Got it?"

Snotlout nodded quickly, his features paling as he noted the intensity of Astrid's words.

"Good," Astrid replied before releasing him, "Now, go clean yourself up."

Snotlout grumbled, wiping his still bleeding nose as he shot Merida, Hiccup and Fishlegs a final glare before storming off. Tuffnut moved to follow him, before turning and looking at Merida, a smirk on his face.

"Your clothes look stupid!" he said, pointing at the Highland princess.

"My mom made those clothes," Fishlegs pointed out.

"Yeah, so?" Tuffnut asked in confusion.

"She made yours too," Fishlegs deadpanned, looking at Tuffnut like the other boy was the stupidest person in the world.

"Oh," Tuffnut replied sheepishly, looking down at his clothes as Ruffnut palmed her face next to him, "Well, they still look dumb."

"Come on, idiot," Ruffnut said, rolling her eyes as she placed a hand on Tuffnut's shoulder and began leading him away, "Let's get out of here before you cramp your brain."

"Well, he certainly has a way with words," Merida commented with a chuckle as she watched the twins leave. Turning, she found Astrid still standing a few feet off, watching the others go before turning her attention back to the three other teenagers.

"Ah guess Ah shud thank ye," Merida stated, a measure of awkwardness in her voice.

"Don't bother, I didn't do it for you," Astrid replied, her eyes narrowing again, "This doesn't change anything between us, Princess. I'm not your ally, I'm not your friend, I'm not your anything. What I am is too busy to deal with the likes of you. So if you want to hang around with your useless boyfriend and his bookworm klutz of a best friend, be my guest."

With that, she turned on her heel and left, giving a mocking wave without looking at them as she went.

"Later, losers," she said before turning a corner and disappearing into the village. Merida bristled as she watched Astrid go, her hands shaking as she clenched them into fists.

"Ooooo Ah hate her sae much," Merida growled, stomping her foot in frustration.

"I think the feeling might be mutual," Fishlegs commented as Hiccup placed a hand on Merida's shoulder in order to calm her down.

"Don't let her get to you, Merida," Hiccup stated, looking at her with concern.

"It's not me Ah'm worried aboot," Merida replied, turning her head and looking Hiccup in the eye, "How can ye let her talk aboot ye like 'at?"

"I'm used to it," Hiccup replied with a melancholy shrug.

"Well, ye shudnae be," Merida stated, reaching up and taking his hand in hers, "Ah daenae like hearin' people puttin' ye down."

"Thanks," Hiccup said, smiling at her as his cheeks began to turn pink.

"O' course," Merida replied nonchalantly, her shrug doing little to hide the reddening of her face.

"Ah Gods," Fishlegs sighed, "You know, I'm happy you two are getting along so well, but there's only so much of this lovey-dovey stuff that I can take."

"Sorry," Hiccup and Merida chuckled at the same time, causing all three of them to laugh when they realized the two had spoken in

unison.

"Come on, let's get oot o' here," Merida suggested, "Ah think Ah've hae jist about as much o' th' village as Ah can stomach fer taeday."

Later,

Merida, Hiccup and Fishlegs wandered aimlessly through the forest, idly chatting with each other and enjoying one another's company.

"Sae, why arenae ye allowed in this 'dragon trainin'?" Merida questioned Hiccup as they crossed a clearing in the woods.

"I guess my dad doesn't think I'm reallyâ€¦up to task for it," Hiccup replied with a sigh, stepping over a fallen branch as they made their way into a thicker part of the woods.

"That's putting it mildly," Fishlegs commented, ducking below a low hanging branch.

"Whit's sae important about this trainin' anyway?" Merida asked, skipping over a rock that jutted out of the forest floor.

"Viking culture all comes down to killing things," Fishlegs explained, as they continued, "And there is no greater thing a Viking can kill than a dragon."

"Sae, it's all about teachin' ye how tae kill dragons?" Merida questioned.

"And how to defend yourselves from them," Fishlegs added sagely, "The best offence is a good defense."

"But yeah, basically," Hiccup stated, shrugging his shoulders.

"Sae, why wonae they let ye or I dae it?" Merida questioned, stepping over an exposed root, "Seems like they shud make sure everyone in th' village knows how tae fight a dragon."

"Well, for one thing, dragon training is done with live dragons," Hiccup explained.

"Did ye say live dragons!?" Merida asked, turning around to look at Hiccup with a shocked look on her face.

"Yep, which is why everyone is not automatically allowed to do it," Fishlegs explained, "We don't want to throw someone to a hungry dragon if we know they can't fight it off."

"Sae, 'at's why they wonae let ye dae it," Merida surmised, eyeing Hiccup.

"That, and my dad is the one who ultimately decides who can and can't be trained," Hiccup elaborated, "Which is also probably why most people think you won't be allowed to train."

"Aye, Ah can understand 'at," Merida stated, tapping her chin thoughtfully, "Da wudnae be too happy if Ah got eaten by a dragon on

Stoick's watch."

"The fact you're a Highlander probably doesn't help either," Fishlegs stated, as he continued into the woods, "The village probably doesn't want you learning any of their secret dragon fighting techniques."

"Secret techniques?" Merida deadpanned, cocking an eyebrow at Fishlegs.

"Yeah, we have plenty," Fishlegs replied defensively, crossing his arm over his chest.

"I would trust him, Merida," Hiccup stated with a chuckle, "Fishlegs has been an avid reader since before he could walk. He's read every book and scroll that this island has, including the Dragon Manual cover to cover. He's got a mind like a steel trap too. Once any little bit of information goes in there, it never comes out."

"'At's quite impressive, Fishlegs," Merida complimented, stepping over a fallen log.

"He's exaggerating," Fishlegs replied, shrugging his shoulders and letting his arms fall to the side, a blush coloring his face.

"I'm really not," Hiccup whispered to Merida conspiratorially, leaning close to her and placing his hand on her shoulder as he did so, causing her to giggle.

Smiling back at her, Hiccup turned to look at her, walking backwards a few steps as he did. Suddenly, he felt his foot snag on an uncovered root, causing him to trip and go rolling backwards through the brush.

"Hiccup!" Merida exclaimed in surprise as she rushed through the bushes, Fishlegs quickly following her, "Are ye okay!?"

"Yeah, I'm fine!" Hiccup called back on the other side of the brush, "Come see what I found!"

Pushing their way through the brush, they found Hiccup laying on the ground, one of the standing stones looming above him.

"Th' standin' stones!" Merida cried with elation, jumping happily.

"Oh no, not again," Fishlegs moaned.

"Whit's th' matter, Fishlegs?" Merida questioned as she offered Hiccup her hand and helped him to his feet, "Didnae ye want tae find Hilde again?"

"Not particularly," Fishlegs sighed as he stepped into the clearing, "She kind of gives me the creeps."

"The creeps?" Hiccup question, brushing himself off, "She's just an old lady."

"I really doubt she's an old lady," Fishlegs replied, lowering his voice as he did, "In fact I think she might be a w-"

"Hello," a thickly accented voice said from directly behind Fishlegs, causing him to let out a cry of surprise, throw his hands into the air and dash over to Merida and Hiccup's side. As he ran, he revealed Hilde had been standing behind him, smiling bemusedly at him while shifting the bundle of sticks slung over her shoulder as the crow on her other shoulder cocked its head to the side as it looked at the large boy quizzically.

"Hilde," Merida greeted her with a smile as Hiccup observed his friend with a cocked eyebrow. Fishlegs quickly lowered his arms and scratched his arm in embarrassment.

"Hello, Jager," Hilde replied with a smile, "How hafe you been?"

"Ah've been fine," Merida replied with a chuckle, "We've been lookin' all over fer ye."

"Oh, did you get lost in zee voods?" Hilde asked.

"Nae," Merida replied in confusion while shaking her head.

"Vell, zere's your problem," Hilde stated simply as she walked past Merida, who followed the old woman with a confused look. Merida quickly glanced at Hiccup, who shrugged in bewilderment.

"Whit dae ye mean?" Merida questioned following Hilde as the old woman made her way across the circle of standing stones, pausing only briefly as the same chill as before ran up her spine when she crossed the threshold of the circle. Fishlegs glanced down at Hiccup, who shrugged and followed the two females, causing the Viking teen to sigh before following as well.

"Zis is a schpecial place, dearie," Hilde explained, "You can't find it by lookink for it. It has to let you find it."

Merida looked at Hilde in utter bafflement, before looking at Hiccup and Fishlegs, who were wearing similar expressions. By then, the trio had followed Hilde into the forested path that lead to her home.

"So, vat brings you to my home, dearies?" she questioned as they entered the clearing where her home was located.

"We were jist wanderin' around, talking about dragon training," Merida explained as the three followed Hilde up to the door of her house.

"Ah, a very exciting subject," Hilde stated as she opened the door and led the teenagers into her home, "So, ven do you all shtart?"

"Well, Fishlegs is the only one who actually gets to go into dragon training," Hiccup explained, motioning to Fishlegs as he did.

"Oh, vhy's zat?" Hilde asked as she set the bundle of sticks down next to her work bench.

"My father doesn't think I'm up for it," Hiccup stated with a sigh

and a shrug.

"Probably thinks th' same o' me," Merida added, "In addition tae th' possibility o' me dying an' startin' a war."

"I zink you two would make great dragon slayers, in my humble opinion," Hilde said as she made her way to the kitchen, "Would you like some tea?"

"Ah'd love some," Merida replied with a smile, "Ah jist daenae think it's fair 'at he wonae even give us a chance."

"Vell, perhaps you could schow him you're ready," Hilde suggested as she put her tea pot on her freshly lit stove.

"But how?" Hiccup asked, "I'm not exactly great with a sword or anything like that."

"Ah am," Merida stated, smiling at him, "Ah cud teach ye."

"Really?" Hiccup asked, a smile growing on his face as well.

"O' course," she replied sincerely.

"Could you maybe teach me too?" Fishlegs asked bashfully.

"Daenae ye already know how tae fight, Fishlegs?" Merida questioned, looking at him in confusion.

"I know the techniques and everything," Fishlegs explained, playing with his hands nervously, "I've just never been good with the whole physical part. I'm not very coordinated."

"Well, Ah'm sure Ah can help ye too," Merida stated, smiling at her friend.

"So, when do we start?" Hiccup asked.

"Why not right now?" Hilde suggested, taking the tea pot off the stove as it began to whistle and pouring each of the teenagers a cup.

"Whit wud we practice with?" Merida questioned, taking her tea and sipping from it, "It's nae like we hae any swords on us."

"Let me take care of zat, Jager," Hilde replied, before walking over to a corner of her work room and rummaging through some wooden objects. After a moment, she made a satisfied noise before pulling out a pair of finely crafted wooden training swords.

"Where did you get those?" Hiccup asked, surprised.

"I'm a voodcarfer, remember?" Hilde questioned, smiling at him.

Later,

The clacking of wood hitting wood sounded throughout the small clearing outside Hilde's house as Merida and Hiccup clashed with each other, parrying each other's blows with their training swords.

Fishlegs sat on the ground to the side, nursing a few fresh bruises on his arms and shoulders as Hilde stood next to him, smiling as she rested against her walking stick and watched the two teenagers spar.

A thin layer of sweat covered Hiccup's forehead as he rapidly back peddled, barely managing to block Merida's rapid assault. Merida, on the other hand, seemed to be completely within her element, an excited smile on her face as she sparred with Hiccup. She feinted high, tricking Hiccup to lifting his sword to block an attack that wasn't coming as she ducked below his guard and stabbed him in the stomach with the rounded point.

Hiccup coughed in pain and stumbled back a few feet. As he recovered, Hiccup looked up to find Merida smiling at him, twirling her sword in her hand.

"Ye hae tae be quicker than 'at!" she called with a giggle, causing Hiccup to smile at her, "Is th' sword too heavy fer ye?"

"Every sword seems to be too heavy for me," Hiccup stated with a sigh, letting the point of the wooden sword rest against the ground. A thoughtful look crossed Merida's face.

"Hiccup, which hand dae ye use tae blacksmith?" Merida questioned.

"Uh, this one, though Gobber says it's wrong. Why do you ask?" Hiccup asked, holding up his free left hand.

"An' which ane dae ye write and draw with?" Merida questioned again.

"This one," Hiccup replied, holding up his left hand again, "Though they told me I was wrong."

"Then why are ye usin' th' sword with yer right hand?" Merida asked in confusion.

"Because my dad told me that was the right way," Hiccup stated with a shrug.

"It might be right fer most people, but it ain't fer ye," Merida explained, "Yer left handed, Hiccup."

"Really?" Hiccup questioned, seemingly having never considered that before.

"Aye, really," Merida stated with a chuckle, "Try holdin' it with yer other hand."

Hiccup did as she asked, a surprised look on his face as he took a few practice swings with the sword.

"Hey, you're right," he said with a laugh, causing Merida to giggle.

"Told ye," Merida stated, twirling her sword in her hand, "Ready tae try again?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Hiccup replied, pointing his wooden sword at her.

"That's the spirit," Merida stated, before running at him, her sword raised to attack. Merida swung high, forcing Hiccup to duck and allowing her to shove him in the chest with her foot, sending the Viking teen stumbling backwards. Managing to catch himself, Hiccup raised his sword and blocked Merida's follow up swing. Managing to push the girl back, Hiccup took a stab at Merida, but she managed to push the attack to the side with her own sword. As Hiccup stumbled forward, Merida wrapped her arm around his outstretched one, pulling him forward and off balance. As she did, Merida swept Hiccup's feet from under him, causing him to fall. As he fell, Hiccup managed to grab hold of the front of Merida's shirt as she twisted him around to throw him to the ground. Falling to the ground, Hiccup kept a fast hold on Merida, dragging her down with him.

Hiccup landed on the ground with a thud as Merida fell on top of him, knocking the wind out the young man. As Hiccup groaned in pain he slowly lifted his head, only to find Merida's face was only inches from his own. The two blinked at each other in surprise as blushes began to creep across their cheeks. Glancing downwards, Merida noticed that Hiccup's hand was still firmly clasped onto the front of her shirt.

"Well, feelin' a wee bit cheeky, are we?" she joked, grinning at him as her blush deepened, "It's good stitchin' though, ye'll hae tae tug a little harder next time."

At that point, Hiccup's entire face flushed as he let go of Merida's shirt like he had been burnt. Merida laughed in delight, sitting up so that she straddled his waist, her apparent enjoyment belayed by the fact her face was flushed as red as her hair.

"I..I wasn'tâ€¦I meanâ€¦I don'tâ€¦Iâ€¦" Hiccup stammered unable to put a coherent thought together. Fishlegs meanwhile was rolling across the ground, laughing to himself as Hilde watched the two with an enigmatic smile on her face.

"Relax, Ah'm jist playin' with ye," Merida giggled as she stood up, though she averted her gaze as she tucked an errant hair behind her ear.

"Maybe swords are not Reiter's shtrong point," Hilde suggested.

"Then whit is?" Merida questioned as reached down and helped Hiccup to his feet.

"Perhaps an art efen more in line with your own skills?" Hilde suggested, her smile growing on her face as a look of elation passed over Merida's. Hiccup however, had only uncertainty written on his features.

Later,

Merida and Hiccup stood side by side in the clearing outside Hilde's home. Set up on the other side of the clearing was a carved, wooden target, another piece from Hilde's apparently massive body of work. Fishlegs and Hilde stood to the side near the front door to her

house, Fishlegs looking slightly nervous.

Hiccup sighed as he looked down at Merida's bow in his hand, running his thumb over the wood he had carved. Merida stood at his side, placing a comforting hand on his arm.

"Come on, Hiccup," she encouraged, smiling at him, "Ye can dae this."

"I really can't," Hiccup replied, shaking his head and laughing nervously.

"Well, let me be th' judge o' 'at," she stated as she took a step away from him, "Now, give it a shot."

"Alright," Hiccup sighed as he notched an arrow on the bowstring and pulled it back, looking down the shaft at the target. Almost immediately, his arm began to shake as he struggled to hold onto the bowstring as he tried to steady his aim. A second later, the string slipped and the arrow went flying through the air, soaring wide of the target and imbedding into a tree at the edge of the clearing. Hiccup swore to himself as his shoulders drooped and his face fell. Glancing over, he saw Fishlegs looking at him sympathetically while Hilde's expression appeared unreadable. Turning his head, he expected Merida to be looking at him in embarrassment, but instead she had a thoughtful look on her face.

"Well, it's obvious ye hae trouble holdin' th' bow straight an' pullin' th' string back all th' way," Merida mused, "But Ah daenae think 'at means ye're eyes are bad."

Reaching out, she cupped Hiccup's chin and turned his head so she looked him dead in the eye, ignoring the small blush spreading across his face.

"In fact, I wudnae be surprised if ye hae very good aim," Merida commented.

"What makes you say that?" Hiccup questioned.

"Ye've got a keen eye fer detail," Merida explained, a slight blush coloring her cheeks as she thought of the drawing she had seen in his sketchbook, "A very keen eye. Ye see thin's clearly, which means ye shud hae good aim."

"So, you think the problem is just I can't keep the bow steady?" Hiccup questioned, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Aye," Merida replied before taking the bow in one hand and Hiccup's wrist in the other, "Here, let me show ye."

Stepping next to Hiccup, Merida took the bow from him, before guiding him so he stood directly behind her.

"Take ma hands," Merida instructed, looking over her shoulder at him.

"Um, excuse me?" Hiccup asked, blushing harder at how closely she stood to him.

"Take ma hands," she repeated, grinning at him, "Whit? Too scared tae hold yer own girlfriend's hands?"

"What did you say?" he asked, his blush lessening as he grinned at her.

"Well, Astrid insinuated Ah was back in th' village an' it got me thinkin', Ah basically am, arenae Ah?" she questioned, her own blush deepening as averted her eyes, "Ah mean, technically Ah'm yer betrothed, which means we skipped 'at whole step, an' she clearly meant it as an insult, but Ah hae tae admitâ€|Ah kind o' liked it."

"So, you want to be my girlfriend?" Hiccup inquired, his grin growing. Seeing the look on his face, Merida smiled as well while meeting his eyes again.

"If ye'll hae me," Merida replied softly.

"I don't think anything could make me happier," Hiccup stated, causing Merida's smile to grow as she giggled melodically. It was at that moment Hiccup noticed how close their faces were for the second time that day. If he just leaned forward he might be able toâ€|but he couldn't do that. Except she seemed to be leaning towards him, subtly tilting her head to the side as her eyes began to close. Did she want it to? Well, there was only one way to find out, wasn't there? That's the line of thought Hiccup went with as he moved forward to press his lips against Merida's.

"Hey!" Fishleg's suddenly shouted, causing Hiccup and Merida to jump apart with a start, their lips having only been inches away from each other, their faces flushed as they tried to recompose themselves "Are you guys going to shoot something or just stand there making puppy dog eyes at each other all day?"

Hiccup glared at his best friend, who only shrugged innocently as he grinned like the cat that had caught the canary, his bulk jiggling with barely contained mirth. Merida, meanwhile, made a show of playing with her hair before clearing her throat to regain Hiccup's attention.

"Anyway, as Ah was sayin'," she stated, turning her back to him once again, "Take ma hands."

Hiccup did as he was asked, cupping Merida's hands in his as she held the bow, having notched an arrow in its string. It was then that Hiccup realized that this position left him with his front side pressed against her back. Specifically, because of their similar heights, it resulted in her rear pressing againstâ€|well a place he figured he probably shouldn't be thinking about at that moment.

"Ye okay?" Merida questioned, glancing over her shoulder at him.

"Me? Yeah, oh yeah, totally fine," he blurted out quickly, happy to have his blood rushing to his face as it began to glow bright red.

"Right," she said with a chuckle, before turning her attention back to the target, "Now, ye're goin' to guide ma hands."

"What do you mean?" Hiccup questioned.

"Ah'm goin' tae be th' ane tae pull th' strin'," Merida explained, "But Ah'm goin' tae close ma eyes while Ah dae it, which means 'at ye're goin' tae hae tae guide th' shot."

"You sure about this?" Hiccup asked, giving her an unsure look.

"Ah hae th' upmost faith in ye," Merida replied, smiling at him before turning her head back around and shutting her eyes, "Ready whenever ye are."

Taking a calming breath, Hiccup looked down at the bow in Merida's hands. Gently, he pulled on her hands, causing her to lift the bow and pull the bowstring back, the wood creaking as the string became taut. Leaning his head on her shoulder, he looked down the shaft of the arrow at the target sitting across the clearing from them.

"Ye can dae this," Merida whispered to him, "Remember, jist breathe."

Following her advice, Hiccup took a deep calming breath, catching the earthy scent of her hair as he did so as the sound of her echoing him reached his ears. As he finished breathing in, he felt a great calmness come over him and everything seemed to become instantly clear. Adjusting her aim slightly, Hiccup reached out and cupped the fingers Merida was using to hold the arrow, causing her to let go of it as they both breathed out at the same time. The arrow went whistling through the air, before hitting the target dead center.

Hiccup's eyes went wide as his jaw went slack, while Fishlegs let out a loud whoop of excitement and thrust his hands into the air. Hilde meanwhile smiled at the sight as her crow let out a caw that sounded oddly like cheering to Hiccup. Opening her eyes, Merida let out an astonished gasp before spinning around and enveloping Hiccup in a hug which he happily returned.

"Ye did it!" she exclaimed with a laugh, "Ah knew ye cud!"

"Well, that makes one of us," Hiccup replied, before squeezing her happily again, "So what does this mean?"

"It means, Reiter," Hilde spoke up, catching all their attentions, "Zat you don't need zee skill to schoot, vat you need is somezing to do zee schooting for you."

"But whit cud dae 'at?" Merida questioned, "He'd need somethin' tae hold th' bowstrin' while he aims."

As Merida said that, a thought came to Hiccup. A glassy look came over his eyes as he lifted his hand and began to move his finger slightly, almost as if he were counting something.

"Oh boy," Fishlegs stated, watching Hiccup intently.

"Whit?" Merida questioned in confusion, "Whit is it?"

"He's got an idea," Fishlegs explained, "An idea of something to

build."

"'At'sâ€|good, right?" Merida asked, looking at Hiccup with concern as he continued to stare off into space.

"Depends on what he plans on building," Fishlegs replied.

"I got it!" Hiccup said suddenly, slamming his fist into his palm.

"Got what?" Merida questioned.

"An idea," Hiccup replied enigmatically, before turning to Hilde "Hilde, do you have any extra wood I can use?"

"Does a Night Fury fly in zee dark?" Hilde questioned rhetorically, smiling at Hiccup.

A/N: Hey guys, sorry for the late update, last week was hell and I had all sort of things going on, but I will work hard to get the next few chapters out quicker to make up for it. I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. As I am from the Boston area, I would be remise not to mention what happened today during the Marathon. My thoughts go out to my fellow New Englanders and to everyone affected by it, and I hope all your guys' do too. Anyway, feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

13. Shot in the Dark

****Chapter 13: Shot in the Dark****

Night hung heavy over the island of Berk, the darkness providing a relief from the rising temperatures that came as spring began to turn to summer. However, there would be no respite from the heat as the stars were blocked out by clouds of smoke and the village was illuminated by dragon fire.

Merida raced through the village, dodging around villagers and ducking out of the way of falling debris like it had become second nature, her bundle of curly locks trailing behind her like a comet's tale. Hearing a high pitched whistling coming from the sky above her, Merida looked up just in time to see a purplish-white ball of fire slam into one of the watch tower, the searing flash of light briefly illuminating a sleek, jet black figure as it shot through the air at breakneck speeds, leaving a ripple in the flames of the now burning structure.

The flaming tower groaned ominously, catching Merida's attention as she ran past it. The popping of wood and snapping of rope caused Merida's eyes to widen in fear and surprise as the tower began to tilt in her direction, threatening to collapse right on top of her. Letting out a yelp of fear, Merida ran as fast as her legs could carry her, desperately trying to get out of the way of the collapsing tower as flaming debris rained around her. Just as it seemed like the burning top of the tower was going to crush her, Merida felt a powerful hand wrap around her arm and yank her off her feet, pulling her to safety.

Stumbling as she regained her footing, Merida coughed against the

smoke cloud kicked up by the collapsed structure. Looking to her side, Merida smiled as she saw a familiar face.

"Thanks, Fishlegs," Merida said to the larger boy.

"Don't worry about it," Fishlegs replied, waving off Merida's thanks as he picked the bucket of water he had with him up off the ground, "You should get to the smithy."

"Right," she agreed with a nod, turning to run off, "Stay safe."

"You too," Fishlegs answered, watching her go, before turning his attention to one of the many fires raging in the village.

Merida rushed around a corner and smiled as the smithy came into sight, smoke pouring out of the chimney and the large front window open to allow Gobber to pass weapons to the Vikings who ran past. Running towards the window, Merida leapt up, grabbing the top of the window frame and swinging herself into the shop, startling Gobber as she flew past him.

"Gods lass!" Gobber exclaimed, putting his good hand to his chest as Merida landed, the wooden floor creaking under her leather boots, "Ye're gaein' tae scare th' life oot o' me ane o' these days."

"Sorry, Gobber," Merida apologized, before turning her attention to Hiccup, who was working at the anvil, and smiling, "How's ma favorite blacksmith this evenin'?"

"Oh, Ah'm daein' alright," Gobber replied obliviously as he looked out the window at the village, causing Merida to roll her eyes, earning a chuckle from Hiccup.

"I'm doing okay too, just in case you wanted to know," Hiccup joked, earning a smirk from Merida, "Are you okay? You look a little shook up."

"Ah'm alright," Merida replied, brushing some the accumulated soot and dust off her clothes, "Ah was by 'at collapsin' tower a minute ago, but Fishlegs made sure Ah got oot o' there in ane piece."

"I'll have to thank him," Hiccup said sweetly as he placed his hand on Merida's arm, smiling warmly at her, earning a similar smile from her as her cheeks turned pink.

"Aye, 'at's great an' all, but 'at axe isnae goin' tae shape itself, lad," Gobber spoke up, eyeing the couple with a smirk. Hiccup smiled back at him before stepping back to the anvil as Merida walked over to Gobber's side.

"Anythin' Ah can dae tae help?" Merida questioned.

"Aye, stand here an' hand oot weapons tae anyone who needs ane," Gobber explained as he tossed a sword to a passing Viking warrior, "Ah need tae see about fixin' some armor plates."

As Gobber turned and began walking away, he accidentally bumped into something, causing him to swear as he clutched his shin in

pain.

"Damnit!" he growled as he glared down at the offending object, which looked like a barrel attached to a wheelbarrow, "Whit did Ah tell ye two aboot keepin' this contraption in ma shop!?"

"Sorry," the two of them apologized at the same time.

"Whit is this blasted thin' anyway?" Gobber grumbled, gesturing at it.

"It's a ballista," Merida said as she handed a war axe to a passing Viking, who only spared her a confused glance before going on his way.

"A what?" Gobber questioned in confusion.

"A ballista," Merida repeated as she turned to look at Gobber, leaning against the windowsill, "It's an auld siege weapon th' Great Empire used tae use. Hiccup built a small version from scratch."

Gobber looked down at the ballista before back at Merida with a confused look on his face.

"Sae did th' Empire jist use bigger wheelbarrows?" Gobber questioned.

Merida palmed her face as Hiccup sighed and rolled his eyes in exasperation before trudging over to the ballista. Leaning down, he pulled on a switch that Gobber hadn't noticed, causing the barrel to spring open like a cracked egg as something inside sprung upwards on a pedestal. The device consisted of a long stock with one end attached to the pedestal. On the other end was a pair of what looked like oversized bows sitting parallel to one another. The bowstrings were much thicker than any Gobber had seen before. Following the strings, Gobber saw they were attached to a slider built into a groove that had been carved into the stock. Attached to the top of the slider was a clasp that looked like it was designed to hold something in place, while a thick length of rope was tied to the back of the slider. The rope ran the length of the groove and was tied to a winch built into the other end of the stock. Behind the winch was a hook that looked like it would fit into the mechanism of the winch, the hook itself appearing to be attached to some sort of trigger built into the end of the stock.

"Saeâ€|" Gobber said, looking at the ballista with a mixture of surprise, wonder and confusion, "Whit daes it dae?"

"Fires one of these," Hiccup stated, holding up a crude bola made of a pair of rocks tied at opposite ends of a length of thick rope.

"At whit?" Gobber questioned, raising an eyebrow at Hiccup.

"Anythin' unfortunate enough tae hae it pointed at them," Merida explained, handing a Viking woman a sword without even looking at her, "Jist ask th' poor birch tree we tested it on th' other day."

"Sae ye're gaein' tae shoot trees with it?" Gobber asked.

"No," Hiccup said solemnly, a serious look on his face, "I'm going to shoot down a Night Fury."

Gobber just stared at Hiccup for a few moments, the gears in his head churning so hard that Hiccup could have sworn he saw steam coming out of them.

"Are ye daft, lad!?" Gobber exclaimed, his eyes wide, "Or dae ye jist hae a death wish?"

"Look, I know it sounds crazy, but I can do this, if you just give me the chance," Hiccup pleaded.

"A chance tae dae whit!?" Gobber demanded, his ire rising, "Get yerself killed? Because there is nae way in Hel 'at ye're takin' down a Night Fury with 'at pile o' junk!"

"So you don't think I can do it?" Hiccup demanded, his eyes narrowing.

"Nae, Ah daenae!" Gobber stated, leaning over so he was looking Hiccup right in the eye.

"But he can dae it!" Merida exclaimed, glaring at Gobber.

"Ah daenae care whether he can or cannae dae it!" Gobber bellowed, whirling on Merida so fiercely that the girl took a step back in surprise, pressing herself against the windowsill, "Ah'm nae gaein' tae let him get hurt jist because he feels like he has somethin' tae prove!"

"I feel I have something to prove?" Hiccup asked, incredulously, "I just feel I have something to prove!? No Gobber, I actually do have something to prove or have you magically forgotten how people treat me in this village!? Slaying a dragon is everything here. And if I can kill a Night Fury, then all my problems will disappear."

"Or ye'll die, which Ah guess, when ye think about it, accomplishes th' same task," Gobber grouched, glaring down at Hiccup, before whirling back around to fix his gaze on Merida, "An' Ah suppose ye've been encouragin' him?"

"Ah hae," Merida admitted, "but 'at's anly because he can do this! He built 'at ballista without ever seein' ane afore. It's the nastiest weapon Ah've ever laid eyes on an' he shoots it truer than th' North Star. If anythin' can take down a Night Fury, it 'at."

"Dae ye two hae any idea whit ye're dealin' with!?" Gobber demanded angrily as he gestured out the window towards the burning village, "These are bloodthirsty monsters! An' a Night is th' worst o' the lot! It'll eat ye up an' spit ye oot afore ye can blink! Ye're nae trained fer this!"

"And I will never be trained if I don't do this, because no one thinks I can handle it!" Hiccup shouted back, "It's a never ending cycle that ends with my remaining the laughing stock of the village for the rest of my life!"

"Ah will talk tae yer father, Ah'm sure Ah can convince him tae let ye intae dragon trainin'," Gobber said, trying to placate the boy.

"Yeah, and since when has my dad listened to anyone about anything?" Hiccup questioned.

"Ah'll make him," Gobber assured him. As he did, there was a loud crash, causing the three of them to look out the window. They saw a large plume of smoke reaching up into the sky, forming a mushroom shape as it rose.

"What in the world?" Gobber whispered as he took a step towards the window.

"Gobber!" a Viking man called from outside, "Stoick's fighting a group of Gronckles! We need your help with the other dragons!"

"Whit? Now!?" Gobber asked.

"Yes, now!" the Viking man replied, a look of confusion on his face as he threw his hands up in frustration.

"Ah'll be right there," Gobber growled in frustration before grabbing an axe off the wall and turned to look at Merida and Hiccup, "Ah know whit thought is goin' through both o' yer heads, an' Ah'll tell ye right now, jist drop it. Daenae dae anythin' stupid!"

With that, he leapt through the window and went running into the village, disappearing from view. Hiccup and Merida watched him leave before glancing at each other.

"Ye thinkin' whit Ah'm thinkin'?" Merida asked him, a smirk forming on her face.

"I'll get the ballista," Hiccup replied with a grin.

As Hiccup left, Merida noticed someone running by.

"Fishlegs!" she called, sticking her head out the shop window to stop the boy as he went running by with a bucket of water. He stumbled to a stop, almost spilling the bucket's contents across the ground.

"Merida?" he asked in surprise, "What's up?"

"Tonight's th' night," she replied, waving him over, "Come on, we need yer help!"

"We're doing it tonight!?" he asked in surprise as he walked over and entered the smithy, placing the bucket of water to the side as he did so.<p>

"Of course, when else were we going to do it?" Hiccup questioned as he rolled the ballista over while Merida closed the shutters.

"I don't know if this is such a great idea guys," Fishlegs stated, playing with his hands nervously as he looked at the ballista.

"Och, daenae chicken oot on us now, Fishlegs," Merida groaned.

"I'm not chickening out!" Fishlegs replied with clearly false bravado, "I just think we need more time to plan."

"Whit's tae plan?" Merida questioned, cocking an eyebrow at Fishlegs, "We find a vantage point, we find th' Night Fury, we shoot it down. Simple as 'at!"

"A bit easier said than done," Hiccup commented as he made some quick adjustments to the ballista.

"We can dae it," Merida stated confidently, smiling down at Hiccup, who smiled back, before she turned her attention back to Fishlegs, "Besides, daenae ye want tae gae down in history as ane o' th' people who took down a Night Fury?"

"Alright," Fishlegs said with a reluctant sigh, "What do you need me to do?"

"Well, the ballista is pretty heavy," Hiccup said, grinning awkwardly at Fishlegs, earning a groan from the Viking teen as he rolled his eyes.

A few minutes later and Merida stepped out of the smithy, a bola slung over her shoulders. She glanced around before signaling inside for the others to come out. A moment later, Hiccup stepped out as well, holding onto the front of the ballista while Fishlegs pushed it like a wheelbarrow behind him.

"Come on," Merida waved them on, heading towards the edge of the village while the boys trailed behind. Merida lead them up a hill on the outskirts of the village, the light from the dragon fires fading behind them until they stood in darkness, the moon and stars shinning above them. On a cliff, a lone watchtower stood looking over the boundaries of the village.

"Ye sure it will be here?" Merida questioned as they came to a stop, the boys resting the ballista on the ground.

"The Night Fury likes to attack outlying buildings," Fishlegs explained as Hiccup took his place behind the ballista, aiming it at the tower, "Helps to divide our people, forcing us to deal with fires on different sides of the village. It's a wonder that this tower hasn't been attacked before."

"Smart," Merida commented as she loaded the bola she was carrying onto the ballista.

"Very," Fishlegs agreed as he and Hiccup cranked the ballista back into its firing position, the strings almost humming from the tension.

"You ready?" Fishlegs asked Hiccup as the boy took a position at the ballista's trigger.

"Ready as I ever will be," Hiccup said, taking a calming breath as he tested the turret part of the ballista.

"Ye can dae this," Merida said to him, placing her hands on his shoulders and stepping behind him, leaning over his right shoulder,

resting her chin on it, "Ah believe in ye."

Then, suddenly her lips were pressed firmly against his cheek, creating the same jolt of electricity that he had felt the first time he had done it. Just as quickly as she had done it, Merida pulled away, stepping back, the darkness hiding the blush growing on her face. Hiccup turned and looked at her, finding her icy blue eyes looking at him as they practically glowed in the moonlight, the same way they had the first night she had come to the island. They took his breath away much the same way as well. Slowly, a smile spread across his face, Merida returning a shy one of her own. Fishlegs, for his part, merely chuckled to himself, shaking his head before coughing into his hand to regain their attention.

"Sorry," Hiccup whispered, turning his attention back to the ballista while Merida looked at her feet and bit her lip out of embarrassment, brushing a few loose hairs behind her ears.

"Don't worry about it," Fishlegs replied with a chuckle, waving his hand dismissively at Hiccup, "Let's shoot ourselves a Night Fury."

Hiccup smiled at his best friend before turning his attention back to the ballista, pointing it up at the night sky as he scanned it, looking for any sign of movement.

"How am I even going to see it?" Hiccup questioned.

"Look fer th' shadow on th' stars," Merida whispered, looking up at the star-filled sky as well.

"Shadow on the stars?" Fishlegs questioned.

"They might not be strong, but th' stars still give off light against th' black sky," Merida explained, "Sae 'at means when it passes in front o' th' stars, th' Night Fury will block them oot."

"Allowing us to see him," Hiccup finished, nodding his head and turning his full attention back to the sky. Moments passed, but there was nothing to indicate anything was flying overhead, the only sound they could hear was the sound of the Vikings battling the dragons back in the village.

"Come on," Hiccup whispered to himself, "Come on, give me something to shoot. Come on."

Growing frustrated, Hiccup rapidly scanned the sky before catching sight of something. For a split second, he thought of dismissing it as nothing more as the twinkling of the stars. Looking at it for a moment longer, he realized that it was in fact a dark shape moving across the sky.

"There!" he said, pointing at the shape.

"Where?" Fishlegs asked, looking around wildly at the dark sky.

"Ah see it!" Merida stated, pointing it out as well, "It's gaein' fer th' tower!"

Grabbing the ballista, Hiccup quickly aimed it at the tower, pointing

it along the flight path he believed the Night Fury was taking.

"Wait fer it tae hit th' tower," Merida whispered in his ear, resting her hand on his shoulder as she leaned against him, "Th' light o' its fire will give ye a better chance tae hit it."

Hiccup nodded absentmindedly, aware of the earthy smell of Merida's hair wafting beneath his nose upon the sea breeze. As it did, he felt the same sense of calm come over again while the telltale, high pitched whistling sound of the Night Fury's eminent attack filled the air. There was a bright flash of light before a blast of purplish-white fire shot through the air and struck the tower with explosive force. As it did, everything seemed to slow down for Hiccup as he watched the light from the fire illuminate a sleek, black figure shooting through the air, right along the path he was aiming down.

"NOW!" Merida exclaimed, prompting Hiccup to pull the trigger and send the bola flying through the air. There was a moment of tense quiet as the three teenagers watched the projectile go spinning through the air. Then, there was a cry that sounded like a combination of pain and surprise before the dark shape went plummeting down to the island below, landing somewhere in the forest.

There was a moment of stunned silence as the three teenagers stared off in the direction the Night Fury had fallen. Slowly smiles began to spread across their faces before Hiccup threw his hands up into the air and whooped with joy. This act caused Merida and Fishlegs to begin celebrating as well. As Fishlegs pumped his fists into the air, Merida spun around and flung herself at Hiccup and pulled him into a hug which he happily returned.

"Ye did it!" she exclaimed with a laugh, before shrieking in surprise as Fishlegs wrapped his arms around both of them and hoisted them off their feet, spinning happily as the trio laughed in unison. Their laughter was cut off, however, by a loud thud from behind them that shook the very ground.

Slowly, Fishlegs turned around, Merida and Hiccup still in his arms. Behind them, no more than a yard away, was a large dragon. The first thing that caught their attention was the black on yellow, forward-facing eyes that glared hatefully at them. They sat atop a crocodilian maw, the lower jaw of which extend slightly farther than the upper one, allowing the dragon's long, jagged teeth to peak through as well as giving the three a glimpse of its pink, forked tongue. Four black, curved horns grew from the back of its head while a single one sprouted from the center of its nose. Its head was attached to a long serpentine neck, down which black spines grew from the base of its skull all the way down to the tip of its long tail. The scales on its back were a dark brownish-orange color broken up by black stripes while those on its underside were a lighter orange color. It walked on four legs, with bat-like wings sprouting from the underside of its arms, folded up. Its two-fingered, front feet and five-toed, back feet all ended in long, vicious black claws.

Instinctively, the three teenagers knew what it was that faced them. The Monstrous Nightmare snarled as it took a step closer to them,

sniffing the air. Fishlegs gulped nervously, his knees knocking together as Merida and Hiccup looked fearfully at each other.

"RUN FISHLEGS RUN!" Merida bellowed as the Nightmare roared at them, the force of its voice shaking the air around them. Fishlegs quickly spun around and ran as fast as his legs could carry him, the Nightmare stomping behind them. The dragon shot a blast of fire at the teenagers, the shot going wide, hitting the ground with tremendous force, nearly knocking Fishlegs to the ground, but the Viking teen managed to keep his footing and continued running down the hill, his friends clutched tightly in his arms.

"Must go faster!" Hiccup exclaimed, looking over Fishlegs' shoulder at the approaching Nightmare which roared angrily at them, "Must go faster!"

For a brief moment, Fishlegs spared a glance over his shoulder to see where the Nightmare was. In doing so, he failed to notice a piece of rubble laying in the street, and tripped over it, sending the three teenagers sprawling. Desperately trying to scramble back to their feet, the Nightmare barreling down on them with its massive jaws opened wide.

Before the Nightmare could reach any of them though, a foot lashed out and struck in the side of the head, snapping its long neck to the side and causing the dragon to stumble. The Nightmare growled in pain as it shook its head in an effort to clear it. Turning to face its assailant, its eyes narrowed and it snarled dangerously as it saw Stoick standing before it.

"If it's a fight ye're lookin' for, I've got one for you right here," Stoick growled, cracking his knuckles dangerously, "So come on if you think ye're hard enough!"

The Nightmare roared at the challenge and charged Stoick, its mouth open to swallow him whole. Seeing the attack coming, Stoick dodged to the side before striking the Nightmare on the jaw with one of his large fists. As the beast reeled from the attack, Stoick quickly followed up with a two punch combo that knocked the Nightmare for a loop. Pressing his advantage, Stoick grabbed the horn on the Nightmare's snout before using it to slam the dragon's face into the ground with enough force to crack the earth.

Taking a step back, Stoick watched as the dragon tried to recover from his assault. Snapping back to reality, the Nightmare roared in anger as a tongue of flame erupted from its mouth. However, instead of shooting outward, the flames engulfed the Nightmare, setting it ablaze without apparently harming it. If Stoick was concerned by this turn of events, he didn't show it, merely narrowing his eyes at the dragon.

The Nightmare snapped its now blazing jaws at Stoick, who managed to just move out of the way. The Nightmare's jaws closed on nothing but air, allowing Stoick the opportunity to look around and try to assess the situation. Before he could, the Nightmare lashed out with its flaming tail, hitting Stoick in the chest and scorching his arm while launching him through the wall of a house. As Stoick picked himself up from the remains of a kitchen table, the Nightmare crawled in through the hole he had made, setting the house ablaze as it did.

Looking down, Stoick grabbed a thick piece of wood that had once been part of the house's wall off the floor before rushing the Nightmare and smacking it on the side of the head with the thick piece of timber. Stoick paid no mind to the fact that the attack has caused his makeshift weapon to light on fire, focusing his attention on the now reeling dragon. Swinging the piece of wood upwards, Stoick caught the Nightmare on the chin, forcing it backwards and out of the house. As the Nightmare tried to recover, Stoick hit it on each side of its head, dazing the dragon. As the Nightmare lowered its head in pain, Stoick lifted the flaming piece of timber above his head before slamming it onto the dragon's skull, snapping the wood in two and knocking the creature out, causing it to collapse to the ground with a thud.

Stoick took a moment to catch his breath, glaring at the Nightmare as his barrel chest huffed and puffed. Glancing at the piece of wood in his hand, he tossed it away before turning around to look at the three teenagers who were picking themselves up off the ground. His eyes narrowed as he looked at each of them in turn.

"We're in trouble, aren't we?" Merida sighed, looking over to the side where she saw Gobber standing to the side with a number of other villagers, scratching the back of his neck and shaking his head while he looked at her in disappointment.

As she said this, there was a loud crashing sound as the roof collapsed in on the house, which was now fully on fire. Stoick looked at it, the light from the fire casting him in an angry, red glow, before he turned his angry gaze back to his son. Hiccup gulped as the sound of a woman's crying reached his ears.

"You have no idea," Fishlegs replied, taking his helmet off and running his hand through his hair, looking sympathetically at his best friend.

A/N: Bit of a shorter chapter this time around. Was going to be a bit longer but I felt this was a good place to stop. Hope you guys liked it. And hey, look at that, I actually got to the part where the movie actually starts. It only took me, what, thirteen chapters to get there. Not bad right? Anyway, critiques and feedback is always welcome, so please review! Later!

14. Hunter's Instinct

Chapter 14: Hunter's Instinct

The sun slowly rose out of the churning waters of the Northern Sea, casting the island of Berk in its yellow glow. It hit the uppermost parts of the island first, catching the small group of people making their way up the hillside and out of the village.

Stoick had Hiccup by the scruff of his neck, carrying the much smaller boy along with him. Fishlegs and Merida followed behind him, Fishlegs with his eyes on the ground while Merida was attempting to burn a hole through the back of Stoick's head with her glare alone. Gobber brought up the rear, hobbling as quickly as he could in an effort to keep up with the others.

"It's not like the last few times, Dad," Hiccup pleaded as the group made their way towards their home, "I mean I really actually hit a Night Fury. You guys were busy with fighting off the other dragons. It went down just off Raven Point. Let's get a search party out there-"

"Stop!" Stoick shouted as he pulled Hiccup up so his face was inches away from his son's, his bellow silencing the boy as the village chief dropped him unceremoniously to the ground.

"Just stop," Stoick said more calmly as Merida came over to Hiccup's side and helped him to his feet, "Every time ye step outside, disaster follows! Can ye not see that I have bigger problems then ye? Enemies breathing down our necks, planning this whole bloody treaty with the Highlanders, and somehow keeping the entire village fed."

"Well, between you and me, the village could probably do with a little less feeding, don't you think?" Hiccup joked, trying to lighten the mood, but instead earning an elbow in the side from Merida as she shot him a glare.

"This isn't a joke, Hiccup!" Stoick shouted before sighing, "I told ye, when there's a dragon attack, ye need to stay put in Gobber's shop. Why can't ye follow the simplest orders?"

"Well, if ye actually gave him a chance tae prove himself, he wudnae hae tae break yer orders!" Merida shouted at Stoick, earning a glare from the Viking chief.

"Oh, don't ye start with me, girly," Stoick growled, leaning down so his face was only a few, "I'm sure ye had yer own part to play in all of this."

Merida met his glare without blinking, but Stoick didn't seem to care as he turned his attention to Fishlegs.

"And you, Fishlegs," Stoick continued, his voice thick with disappointment, "I've come to expect much better from ye."

"I'm sorry, sir," Fishlegs apologized, his eyes lifting to look at Stoick, "But Hiccup's telling the truth, we really did shoot down a Night Fury!"

"I don't want to hear it, Fishlegs!" Stoick snapped, causing Fishlegs to look meekly at the ground again, "I'm tired of hearing this ridiculous story from all of ye!"

"It doesnae matter whit ye think!" Merida shouted, her anger growing by the second, "It happened an' whether ye like it or nae, it's because yer son risked his life tae prove himself tae ye an' this entire bloody village!"

"Trust me, girl," Stoick snarled, turning his attention back to Merida, "Hiccup is a lot of things, but a dragon slayer is not one of them."

"Thanks, Dad," Hiccup griped.

"It's true," Stoick replied, before turning his ire towards his son,

gesturing towards him with his massive hands, "And ye won't be until ye sort all ofâ€|this out."

"You just pointed to all of me," Hiccup observed with confusion.

"Yes, that's it," Stoick agreed, seemingly ignoring Hiccup's confusion, "Stop being all of you and everything will work out."

"'At doesnae make any sense," Merida stated, raising an eyebrow at Stoick in confusion.

"I don't care," Stoick replied, "I have more important things to do then stand here and argue with you three. Go back to the house, and stay there. That includes you, Fishlegs. Ye'll stay there until yer parents come and get ye. Understand?"

The three teenagers nodded their heads, all avoiding eye contact with Stoick. Nodding as well, Stoick turned to face Gobber.

"Gobber," he stated coldly, "Make sure they get there. I have their mess to clean up."

"Right," Gobber agreed as Stoick began making his way back towards the village. Turning, he faced the trio as he sighed.

"Ah told ye three tae stay in th' shop," he stated, shaking his head in disappointment as he made his way past them towards the house.

"We really did hit ane," Merida stated as he and the others began to follow Gobber.

"Sure," Gobber replied, clearly not believing.

"He never listens," Hiccup sighed as they approached the front door.

"Aye, well it runs in th' family," Gobber agreed, rolling his eyes as he did.

"Even when he does, it's with this disappointed scowl, like someone skimped on the meat in his sandwich," Hiccup continued as they reached the front door before turning around, putting on an exaggerated version of his father's accent, sounding more like Merida or Gobber than Stoick, "Excuse me, barmaid! Ah'm afraid ye brought me th' wrong offsprin'! Ah ordered an extra-large boy with beefy arms, extra guts an' glory on th' side! This here, this is a talkin' fishbone!"

"Ye're lookin' at this all wrong," Gobber stated, trying to placate the frustrated young man, "It's nae sae much whit ye look like, it's whit's inside 'at he cannae stand."

>The three teenagers looked at Gobber in stunned silence for a moment before an angry look crossed Merida's face.<p>

"Gobber!" she admonished as Hiccup let out a depressed sigh.

"Och, sorry! 'At came out wrong," Gobber apologized as he smacked his

hand against his face in frustration, "Look, th' point is ye hae tae stop tryin' sae hard tae be somethin' ye're nae, an' Ah daenae mean 'at as a bad thin'. Ye've got good thin's goin' fer ye, Hiccup. Ah can see 'at now. Ye jist need yer father tae see them now."

"I don't want my father to see me for what I am," Hiccup sighed, "I just want to be one of you guys."

"Look, like Ah said afore, Ah'll try tae talk tae yer father," Gobber said, "Ah jist need ye tae help me out by nae gettin' intae any more trouble, alright?"

Hiccup quietly nodded, his eyes on the ground.

"'At goes fer ye two as well," Gobber stated, turning his attention towards Merida and Fishlegs, earning nods from each of them as well.

"Alright, ye three best get inside then," Gobber said, motioning towards the door. Glumly, Hiccup turned and opened the door, walking inside and followed by Merida and Fishlegs. Gobber sighed and shook his head as the teenagers closed the door behind them, before turning and making his way back down the hill towards the village, oblivious to the trio exiting the house through the backdoor.

Later,

"Ye're sure it landed here, Hiccup?" Merida questioned, as the three teenagers looked at the empty clearing before them. Hiccup sighed in frustration as he looked at the map he had quickly drawn in his sketchbook.

"The gods hate me," Hiccup grouched as he snapped the sketchbook closed and tucked it into his vest before exiting the clearing and making his way down the hill, Merida and Fishlegs following behind, "Some people lose a knife or a mug. No, not me, I manage to lose an entire dragon!"

Growling in frustration, Hiccup swatted at a low hanging branch, only for it to spring back and smack him in the face. Hiccup let out a cry of pain as he brought his hand up to his face.

"Hiccup!" Merida shouted in surprise as she ran over to his side, "Are ye okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Hiccup sighed as he allowed Merida to gingerly peel his hand away from his face, revealing the angry red welt on the side of his face. She winced in sympathy as she brushed some of his hair away from his face to get a better look at the injury. A blush crossed Hiccup's cheeks as he noticed how close their faces were. Merida didn't seem to notice as she stepped back.

"It'll jist stin' fer a little bit," she surmised, "Ye shud count yerself lucky 'at it didnae hit ye in th' eye."

"Thanks, Mer," Hiccup replied, rubbing the injured part of his face.

"Mer?" Merida asked, a small smile on her face.

"It's a nickname," Hiccup said, his blush growing brighter as he scratched the back of his head in embarrassment, "You know, so we don't have to be so formal with each other all the time."

"Ah like 'at," Merida replied, giving Hiccup a genuine smile that caused his face to glow redder as Merida walked up to him, placing a hand on his shoulder, "Now, how about we gae find 'at dragon, eh Hic?"

Hiccup chuckled and was about to reply when Fishlegs caught their attention.

"Hey guys!" he called from higher up on the hill, looking into a thick patch of forest, "I think I found something!"

"Did you find the dragon?" Hiccup asked as he and Merida ran over to Fishlegs' side.

"No, but I think I found someone who knows where it is," Fishlegs replied before indicating into the forest, where the three saw a wisp floating amongst the brush, beckoning them to follow it.

"Hey, Mer," Hiccup spoke up, not taking his eyes away from the wisp, "Didn't you say something about wisps leading a person to their destiny?"

"Aye, Ah did," Merida replied, a smirk on her face as she continued watching the wisp as well.

"I really hate this fairy stuff," Fishlegs sighed as the three of them made their way into the brush, following the wisp as it lead them into the woods. They followed the wisp for a few minutes before they came across a broken tree and a deep furrow in the ground the disappeared over an embankment as the wisp disappeared from sight.

"Well, I think we found the dragon," Hiccup commented as he led the other two carefully down the hill, following the gouge in the ground. Climbing up the embankment where the furrow ended, the three of them peeked over the edge, only to duck back behind the embankment as they saw the pitch black form of the Night Fury laying in a clearing on the other side.

"Yeah, that's the dragon," Fishlegs agreed with a fearful tone.

"Sae, whit dae we dae now?" Merida questioned.

"I have no idea," Hiccup admitted, his eyes wide.

"Well, we cannae stay here," Merida stated, and began to move to crawl over the embankment, but was stopped when Hiccup reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her back down.

"Whit's yer problem!?" she snapped, glaring at him.

"That's one of the most dangerous dragons in the world," Hiccup explained, "we can't just go running out there."

"Night Fury," Fishlegs whispered, more to himself than the others,

"Speed: Unknown. Size: Unknown. The unholy of lightning and death itself. Never engage this dragon. Your only chance, hide and pray it does not find you."

"¿Whit?" Merida questioned.

"The entry in the Book of Dragons, I'm guessing," Hiccup replied, "Like I said before, he's memorized the thing cover to cover, and he tends to retreat into facts when he gets excited or scared."

"If ye two are sae scared o' this dragon, then why did we shoot ane down?" Merida questioned. Hiccup and Fishlegs shared a look before turning back to her and shrugging. Merida groaned in frustration before pulling herself over the embankment and sliding down the other side.

As Fishlegs and Hiccup looked on in fear, Merida hid behind a large rock that sat between the embankment and where the Night Fury lay. She slipped her bow from around her shoulders and nocked an arrow on the string, pointing it at the Night Fury as she walked around the rock. There was brief, tense pause as Merida stood aiming her bow at the dragon, before she turned to look at the two boys and signaled them to come down with her head. Sharing a quick glance at each other, Fishlegs and Hiccup climbed over the embankment and slid down the hill, Hiccup drawing a dagger from his belt as he went, holding it in his shaking hands.

Coming around the rocks, Hiccup saw the Night Fury lying before him, its eyes closed and its body tangled up in the ropes of the bola.

"Oh, we did it!" Hiccup exclaimed happily, letting his guard down as he took a few steps towards the Night Fury, "This fixes everything!"

"Yes!" he exclaimed happily as he walked right up to the Night Fury and placed his foot on the dragon's head, "I have brought down this might beast!"

Suddenly, the Night Fury let out a loud growl and it struggled against the bonds, causing Hiccup to stumble backwards as Merida pulled the arrow in her bow further back and Fishlegs jumped behind the rock to hide. As Hiccup caught himself, he pointed his knife at the Night Fury and began edging towards the dragon.

As Hiccup approached it, the Night Fury's eyelid opened, looking at him with its pale green eye. Hiccup held the dragon's gaze for a few moments as it grumbled and breathed deeply. Hiccup's hands shook as he took a few breathes in an effort to calm his nerves.

"Hiccup," Merida whispered to Hiccup, catching his attention and locking their gazes, "You can do this."

Nodding, Hiccup turned his attention back to the Night Fury, which continued to watch him almost impassively.

"I'm going to kill you, dragon," Hiccup stated, breathing hard, "I'm gonna gonna cut out your heart and bring it to my father."

Turning the knife over in his hand, he held it up to plunge it into

the Night Fury's chest.

"I am a Viking," Hiccup stated, "I am a Viking!"

"You're a Viking," Fishlegs agreed.

"Ye can dae this, Hiccup," Merida urged him on, "Finish it."

Taking a deep breath, Hiccup lifted his knife above his head, ready to stab the Night Fury. At that moment, Hiccup looked the dragon in the eye again. They held gazes for a few moments before the Night Fury let out a resigned sigh and closed its eyes. Hiccup closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, lifting the knife as high as he could, mentally psyching himself up to kill the Night Fury.

Instead, Hiccup growled in frustration and dropped his hands, resting the handle of the knife against his head before dropping his hands helplessly to his side.

"Hiccup, whit's wrong?" Merida questioned, looking at him in confusion.

"I did this," Hiccup stated as he stepped away from the Night Fury.

"Yes, ye did," Merida replied, slowly lowering her bow, "This is whit ye wanted. Tae kill a dragon. Tae prove yerself tae yer father!"

"I can't," Hiccup stated, shaking his head, "Not like this."

"Hiccup, all o' th' work ye put intae this, ye cannae jist walk away," Merida stated, clearly not understanding.

"I looked into its eye, Mer," Hiccup explained, "It's scared. Just like us. It knows what's happening. It knows what we're doing. This isn't a hunt, Merida. This is murder."

A thoughtful look crossed Merida's face as she completely lowered her bow. At the same, Fishlegs inched out from around the rock and walked over to Hiccup's side.

"What do we do now?" Fishlegs questioned.

"I don't know," Hiccup sighed as he fell to his knees besides the Night Fury.

"Ah dae," Merida spoke up as she kneeled down next to Hiccup, swinging her bow back around shoulders while holding onto the arrow. Reaching out, she grabbed one of the ropes entangling the Night Fury and began sawing at it with the sharp edges of her arrow head. Hiccup and Fishlegs merely watched her for a few moments as she worked away at the rope.

"Well, are ye two gaein' tae help me, or are ye jist gaein' tae stare at me all day?" Merida questioned with a hint of irritation as she paused in her work to shoot an annoyed glance at the boys. Immediately, Hiccup and Fishlegs sprang into action, Hiccup cutting at the ropes with his knife as Fishlegs drew one of his own and did the same.

As it felt the bonds being cut, the Night Fury opened its eyes in surprise. In moments, the three teenagers had loosened most of the bonds holding the dragon. As soon as it was free enough, the Night Fury suddenly sprung to life, rolling to its feet and spinning around to face them. It knocked Fishlegs to the side with a swing of its tail before pouncing on Hiccup and Merida, holding them against the ground with its clawed forelegs.

For a tense moment, the Night Fury merely stared at the frightened teenagers, its black on green eyes encompassing the entirety of their vision, the hot breath pumping out of its nostrils washing over them. Reaching out, Hiccup grabbed onto Merida's hand, clenching it tightly in his and shut his eyes as the Night Fury began to rear back. Instead of attacking though, the dragon brought its face a few inches from their own and bellowed at the top of its lungs, the roar so loud it seemed to shake the ground around them.

Then, in a blur of motion, the Night Fury spun around and dashed away, leaping into the forest, gliding into the early morning fog, smashing against an outcropping of rock as it went. Hiccup let out a few panicked gasps for air and held his hand to his chest while a wide-eyed Merida ran a hand through her red hair, the force of the Night Fury's roar having knocked the clothe out of her hair. Their hands were still clenched together, so hard, in fact, that their knuckles had turned white.

"Are you guys alright!?" Fishlegs shouted as he ran over to their side, ignoring the pain in his chest from where the Night Fury had struck him.

"Ah'm okay," Merida said, clearly a bit dazed as she picked herself off the ground before helping Hiccup to his feet, "Are ye alright, Hiccup?"

"Yeah, fine, never better," Hiccup mumbled as he let her hands go and began to walk away. He only walked a few steps before his legs seemed to give out underneath him and he collapsed to the ground, face first.

"Hiccup!" Merida exclaimed as she and Fishlegs rushed over to his side, before sharing helpless looks as they tried to figure out what to do to help.

Meanwhile,

The Great Hall was packed with Viking men and woman, all gathered around a large round table used for such meetings, illuminated from the fire burning in a fire pit carved into the table's center.

"Either we finish them, or they'll finish us!" Stoick stated from his position at one end of the table, a map laid out before him, "It's the only way we'll be rid of them!"

"If we find the nest and destroy it, the dragons will leave," Stoick explained as he picked up a knife and drove it into a largely uncharted corner of the map, marked with the images of dragons, "They'll find another home. One more search is all I ask."

"Those ships never come back," a Viking man on the other side of the table pointed out.

"We're Vikings, it's an occupational hazard," Stoick argued, "Now who's with me?"

The men and women of the village remained quiet, no one willing to volunteer for what many considered a suicide mission.

"Alright then," Stoick stated, his eyes narrowed in determination, "Those who don't go will look after Hiccup and the princess."

At that statement, everyone in the room jumped at the chance to volunteer for what many considered a suicide mission.

"That's more like it," Stoick surmised before dismissing them. As the others left the Great Hall, Gobber remained behind, drinking from a flagon attached to his prosthetic arm. Whipping his mouth, he turned to face Stoick, who had begun to make his way over to him.

"Suppose Ah shud gae pack," he stated, though he had a feeling that Stoick had other plans in mind.

"No," Stoick replied, proving Gobber's hunch correct, "It's come time for the new recruits training to begin. I need ye to stay behind and take care of it."

"Oh, an' Ah suppose while Ah dae 'at, Hiccup an' Merida can watch ma shop," Gobber guessed, "Molten metal, razor sharp blades, plenty o' time tae themselves. Whit's th' worst 'at cud happen?"

"What am I going to do with them, Gobber?" Stoick sighed as he sat down next to his old friend.

"Put them in dragon trainin' with th' others," Gobber provided.

"No, seriously," Stoick replied.

"Ah am bein' serious," Gobber pressed.

"He'd be killed before you let the first dragon out of its cage," Stoick stated fearfully, "And the girl? She's likely to kill one of the others as she is a dragon."

"Oh ye daenae know 'at," Gobber said, waving his hand dismissively.

"Actually, I do know that," Stoick replied certainly.

"Nae, ye daenae," Gobber argued.

"No, actually I do," Stoick pushed.

"Nae, ye daenae!" Gobber contended, raising his voice and pointing at Stoick with his good hand.

"Listen, ye know what their like," Stoick said as he stood up, "Merida is an undisciplined, self-centered, hot head who resents each and every one of us. And Hiccup, well since the time he could crawl he's beenâ€|different. He doesn't listen, he has the attention span

of a sparrow. I take him fishin' and he goes huntin' for trolls!"

"Trolls exist!" Gobber interjected, "They steal yer socks. But only th' left anes. Whit's with 'at?"

"When I was a boy," Stoick began as he started pacing around the hall.

"Och, here we gae," Gobber muttered to himself as he looked at his drink.

"My father told me to bang my head against a rock and I did it," Stoick continued, "I thought it was crazy, but I didn't question him about it. And ye know what happened?"

"Ye got a headache," Gobber provided sarcastically.

"That rock split in two," Stoick stated, ignoring Gobber's comment, "It taught me what a Viking could do, Gobber. He could crush mountains, level forests, tame seas!"

"Even as a boy, I knew what I was, what I had to become," Stoick sighed as he sat back down, "Hiccup is not that boy."

"Nor was he meant tae be," Gobber stated as he turned to face Stoick, "What ye hae tae understand is th' boy has strengths. They're nae yer strengths, but they're there, Ah've seen them, an' whether ye like it or nae, they're th' strengths he's goin' tae hae tae face th' world with. Ye cannae change him Stoick, naebody can, but ye can prepare him."

"Ah know ye daenae like it," Gobber continued as Stoick seemed to perk up at his words, "Especiallyâ€|with whit happened with Val, but th' truth is ye wonae always be around tae protect him. Ane day, ye'll be gone too an' he'll be on his own. He needs tae know how tae protect himself."

Stoick sighed as a small smile spread across Gobber's features.

"But dae ye know who will be around him fer th' rest o' his life?" Gobber questioned rhetorically, "Merida. Fer better or worse, ye an' Fergus hae chained those two taegether through yer treaty. An' who wud ye rather hae at his side. Some dead weight princess? Or a woman who knows how tae handle herself as well as him, if nae better?"

"I guess ye have a point," Stoick sighed.

"Oh, Ah know Ah dae," Gobber replied with a chuckle as he finished off his drink, "An' if ye ask me, this whole betrothal is definitely shapin' up fer th' better."

"I thought she hated him," Stoick questioned, raising an eyebrow at Gobber.

"She did, but she warmed up tae him, thanks tae those strengths o' his Ah was tellin' ye aboot earlier," Gobber explained with a chuckle, "Now they're shapin' up tae be quite th' couple, if I dae say sae myself."

"Ye sure about that, Gobber?" Stoick asked, clearly unconvinced, "No offense, but romance was never really your thing."

"Hey, ma eternal bachelor status has nothin' tae dae with this," Gobber shot back, "Ah spend more time with them every day than ye dae, sae trust me, Ah know whit Ah'm talkin' aboot."

"Whatever you say, old friend," Stoick said, laughing as he slowly shook his head, "Whatever you say."

A/N: Sorry about there having been no updates the last few weeks guys, but I've been super busy with finishing up school. I hope you guys can forgive me! This was a fun chapter to write, especially Gobber's conversation with Stoick at the end. Gave me a chance to show how Gobber's changed from the movie version. I hope you guys liked it! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

15. What You Wish For

Chapter 15: What You Ask For

Fishlegs sighed as he stood outside his home. Lights flickered through the window into the darkened outdoors as the sound of muffled voices and a heavy person, most likely his father, pacing across the wooden floor. For a few seconds, Fishlegs seemed to wrestle with himself before taking a calming breath and reaching out to grasp the door. Gulping nervously, he pulled it open and stepped inside.

Fishlegs' home was a humble one, stocked with simple pieces of furniture, small pieces of Viking art and scattered odds and ends related to his mother and father's occupations of seamstress and shipwright. Glancing to his side, he saw his mother and father in the parlor. His mother was sitting in her rocking chair, her long blonde hair tied back in a long braid as her worried blue eyes watched his father pace back and forth. Her hands, however, were busy as ever, stitching a tunic perfectly without even looking at it. Fishlegs' father, on the other hand, was circling the parlor like some sort of predator, his large, powerful arms crossed in front of his muscular chest. His dark brown eyes were narrowed as his rapid breathing stirred his bushy brown beard.

Stepping inside, Fishlegs loudly cleared his voice, catching both of his parents' attentions as he closed the door behind him.

"Umâ€|Hey Mom. Hey Dad," Fishlegs said awkwardly, waving at them as his parents stared at him.

"Fishlegs!" his mother exclaimed, her face lighting up as she saw her son, "We were so wor-"

"Where have you been!?" his father barked, cutting off his wife as he took a menacing step towards Fishlegs, "The chief told us you would be waiting of us at his home, but when we got there, you were nowhere to be found! Where did you go!?"

"Dad, I just went with Hiccup and Merida to-" Fishlegs began to explain but stopped when his father growled angrily at him.

"I should have known that useless runt and his pathetic princess were to blame for all this!" he shouted.

"Fishguts!" Fishlegs' mother snapped at her husband.

"Stay out of this, woman!" Fishguts rounded on his wife, missing his son's eyes narrowing and his hands clenching into fists.

"I thought I told you not to hang around with that good-for-nothing anymore," Fishguts stated, pointing a finger at his son, "I thought I told you your time was better spent with Spitelout's boy."

"Snotlout's a jerk, Dad," Fishlegs replied, looking his father dead in the eye, "I don't like hanging out with him."

"I don't care if you don't like him!" Fishguts shouted, "You're not supposed to like him! What you're supposed to do is learn from his example about how to be a proper Viking!"

"I do know how to be a proper Viking!" Fishlegs shouted right back, catching his mother off guard, but seeming to leave his father unphased.

"Well, I sure as Hel don't see it!" Fishguts roared, "You're a blubbering mess most of the time, and always have your nose stuck in this book or that scroll. Certainly not what I was doing at your age."

Fishlegs merely shook his head and rolled his eyes in reply.

"This is all that Hiccup's fault," Fishguts growled, "He infected you with whatever it is that's wrong with him. I don't know what you're mother was thinking, letting you hang around with that scrawny half-wit! And now he's twice as bad with that Highlander whore!"

Fishlegs mother looked like she was going to say something again, but fell silent when she caught sight of Fishlegs glaring daggers at his father.

"Take it back," Fishlegs growled.

"What?" Fishgut's questioned, looking at his son in confusion.

"What you said," Fishlegs elaborated angrily, "Take it back!"

"Why on Earth would I do a thing like that?" Fishguts asked dangerously as he leaned down to look his son in the eye.

"Because they're my friends, and I'm not going to just sit here and listen to you bad mouth them!" Fishlegs shouted back, catching his father by surprise.

"You're standing up for them?" Fishguts chuckled incredulously, "Out of everyone on this island, you choose those sacks of dragon dung to stand up for?"

"I told you not to insult them!" Fishlegs yelled, getting in his

father's face.

"Or what?" Fishguts challenged, his eyes narrowing.

"Or I'll make you stop," Fishlegs answered, his eyes narrowing as well.

The two glared at each other for a few tense moments as Fishlegs' mother looked on with fear, her hands playing nervously with one another.

"Fishlegs," she spoke up, a nervous crack in her voice, "Maybe you should go to bed, you have dragon training in the morning. Your father needs to rest up for his expedition with the chief tomorrow too."

Fishguts sighed, breaking eye contact with Fishlegs as he stood back up.

"Your mother's right. We both have important things to do tomorrow," Fishguts said before gesturing to the stairs, "Go to your room and get some sleep."

"Fine," Fishlegs relented, still glaring at his father, "Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight dear," his mother replied, seeming to calm as the situation defused while Fishlegs turned and marched up the stairs. Fishguts watched him go, before sighing again as he walked over to a chair next to his wife's rocker and collapsed into it.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with that boy, Ribbon," Fishguts groaned, "Sure, he's right about knowing what it is to be a Viking but he's nothing like what a Viking should be."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Ribbon stated as she picked up the clothing she had been working on and set back to work.

"What makes you say that?" Fishguts questioned.

"Do you even realize what just happened there?" Ribbon asked, raising her eyebrow at her husband.

"No," Fishguts replied, shaking his head after a moment.

"He stood up to you!" Ribbon explained with an exasperated sigh, "When was the last time Fishlegs stood up to you about anything?"

"I don't know," Fishguts admitted.

"You don't know because he never has," Ribbon stated, looking her husband dead in the eye, "About anything."

"That's not true," Fishguts said disbelievingly.

"Fishlegs has let you walk all over him about everything," Ribbon explained, "Even the first time you tried to stop him from being friends with Hiccup. Something's changed. He's braver now than he was before and I think Hiccup and Princess Merida have something to do with it."

"Oh, you don't know what you're talking about," Fishguts said as he waved his hand dismissively at his wife.

"Time will tell, dear husband," Ribbon replied as she brought her attention back to her work, "Time will tell."

Meanwhile,

Hiccup quietly opened the door to his home, peeking in as he did. He saw his father sitting by the fireplace, his helmet removed and his eyes focused on the burning embers which he was prodding with a fire poker. His attention seemed to be wholly on the fire, giving Hiccup the hope that he and Merida could slip by unnoticed. Turning his attention to the redhead standing anxiously behind him, Hiccup signaled for her to follow him inside and remain as quiet as possible. Merida nodded in reply and the two slipped inside, closing the door behind them.

Their eyes focused on Stoick, the two teenagers walked briskly but quietly towards the stairs, doing their best to not draw attention towards themselves. Reaching the foot of the stairs, Hiccup and Merida carefully began to make their way up to the second level, starting to believe they had gotten by the Viking chieftain without being noticed.

"Hiccup," Stoick suddenly said as he sat up taller, causing the two teenagers to freeze in place and grimace.

"Dad!" Hiccup replied awkwardly, before sighing and taking a step back, "Uhâ€¦I have to talk to you."

"I need to speak to ye too, son," Stoick replied as he stood up and faced Hiccup and Merida, walking over to the stairs,

"Ah, uh, guess Ah shud jist leave ye two alone tae talk," Merida stated as she made a move to leave, but stopped when Stoick held up his hand.

"I need to speak with ye as well, girl," Stoick said.

"Oh," Merida replied, taking a step back so she was even with Hiccup as she blinked in surprise, "Alright then."

Both Hiccup and Stoick took deep breathes as they prepared to say what they needed to say.

"I think it's time ye both learned to fight dragons," Stoick stated, gesturing with his hand while not looking at Merida or Hiccup.

"I decided I don't want to fight dragons," Hiccup said at the same time as he father, unwittingly making the same motions as well.

"What?" they both said before turning to Merida.

"Daenae look at me," Merida replied, holding her hands up in defeat.

"Um, ye go first," Stoick said, pointing at his son.

"No, no, you go first," Hiccup replied as he and Merida climbed back down the stairs.

"Alright," Stoick sighed, clasping his hands together, "You two get yer wish. Dragon trainin'. Ye both start in the mornin' with the others."

Hiccup and Merida both gasped in surprise before glancing at each other.

"Oh man, I should have gone first," Hiccup moaned as he tried to think of a way out of the situation, "because I was thinking, you know, we have a surplus of dragon-fighting Vikings but do we have enough bread-making Vikings, or small home repair Vikings?"

There was an awkward silence as both Merida and Stoick looked at Hiccup like he had grown an extra head.

"What's he talkin' about?" Stoick asked Merida.

"Ah hae nae idea," Merida replied honestly, not taking her eyes off of Hiccup.

"Ye'll need this," Stoick said, picking up an axe and handing it to Hiccup, who nearly fell over from the weight.

"One for you too," Stoick continued as he picked up a matching axe and handed it to Merida, who fumbled with it in surprise.

"I don't want to fight dragons," Hiccup admitted fearfully.

"Come on," Stoick scoffed in amusement as he turned away from the stairs, "Yes ye do."

"Let me rephrase," Hiccup said as he followed his father, "Dad, I can't kill dragons."

"But ye will kill dragons," Stoick said encouragingly.

"No, I'm really, very, extra sure that I won't," Hiccup argued as he tried to keep his grip on the axe without tipping over.

"The time has come, Hiccup," Stoick stated as he turned back to face his son.

"Can you not hear me?" Hiccup questioned, before turning to Merida, "You can hear me right? I am talking?"

"This is serious, son," Stoick said, bringing Hiccup's attention back to him, "When ye carry that axe, ye carry all of us with you. That means ye walk like us, ye talk like us, and ye think like us. Deal?"

"This conversation is feeling very one sided," Hiccup groused.

"Deal?" Stoick pressed, growing annoyed.

Hiccup sighed in defeat.

"Deal," he muttered.

"Good," Stoick replied with a nod of his head, before turning his attention to Merida, "This all goes double for you, girl. By doing this, I am bringin' ye into the tribe. I'm makin' you one of us in a way that not even yer marriage to Hiccup will. Ye will learn our ways and ye will be a Viking. I'm trusting that ye can handle that. Gobber says that ye've become closer to my boy. I'm bettin' on him bein' right and investin' in you. I am hopin' that by doin' this it will make you a better wife, a better partner for him than if I didn't."

"Ah-Ah daenae know whit tae say," Merida said, taken aback.

"How about deal?" Stoick suggested.

"Oh, right," Merida stated, flushing with embarrassment, "Deal."

"Good," Stoick said as he picked up a bag and flung it over his shoulder before putting his helmet on, "We're makin' one last search for the dragons' nest. I'm goin' down to the dock to prepare for the journey. We leave with the dawn. So, train hard, I'll see you both soon. Probably."

"We'll be here when you get back," Hiccup said with a sigh as Stoick exited the house and closed the door behind him, "Probably."

The next day,

It was a grey, overcast day as the Viking teenagers made their way down to the arena. Fishlegs walked by himself, shuffling his feet and sighing as he went, palming the old, worn two-handed warhammer his father had given him on his last birthday. Looking up, he saw Snotlout and Tuffnut glancing back at him, sneering as they did, Snotlout resting a mace against his shoulder while Tuffnut played with the two-headed spear he was carrying. Fishlegs then looked over at the girls. Ruffnut noticed his watching and rolled her eyes before turning away, fiddling with the knife and hatchet she was carrying. Astrid, however, held his gaze for a few moments before shaking her head and turning away as well, lifting her waraxe onto her shoulder. He sighed again and shook his head. This was not going to be an enjoyable experience, he could already tell.

As they reached the portcullis-blocked entrance leading into the arena, they found Gobber waiting for them with his hook hand equipped. He eyed Snotlout and Tuffnut wearily for a moment before smirking at the group.

"Well, looks like everyane is here" he said as he turned to the portcullis and lifted it up, "Welcome tae dragon trainin'!"

As they entered the arena, the teenagers took the time to look around, most of their faces frozen in expressions of awe and wonder, as the majority of them had never been able to see the arena from the inside before.

"I hope I get some serious burns," Tuffnut stated with all too much seriousness.

"I'm hoping for some mauling," Ruffnut commented, nonchalantly, "Like on my shoulder or lower back."

"Yeah," Astrid agreed, "It's only fun if you get a scar out of it."

"Ah daenae think Ah'll ever understand whit Vikings consider fun," a new voice said from behind them. Turning, they found Hiccup and Merida standing next to Gobber, Both holding the axes Stoick had given them the night before while Merida also had her bow slung around her shoulders along with her quiver.

As Fishlegs face lit up with elation, Snotlout, Tuffnut and Ruffnut look on incredulously, and Astrid began to seethe.

"What are they doing here!?" Astrid demanded, glaring at Gobber as she pointed an accusatory finger at Hiccup and Merida, before turning her attention towards them, "What are you doing here!?"

"We're here fer th' same reason ye are," Merida stated, narrowing her eyes at Astrid, "Tae learn how tae fight dragons."

"You're an outsider!" Astrid shouted, "You have no right to be here! Especially not with this loser!"

"Well, yer chief said we dae," Merida shot back, glaring at Astrid, "Ye goin' tae argue with him about it?"

Astrid growled but didn't argue, clenching her hands into fists until her knuckles turned white. Snotlout meanwhile was glaring at Hiccup, who seemed more interested in examining the dirt on his boots.

"You're in over your head, little princess," Astrid stated forebodingly.

"We'll see," Merida shot back, not taking her eyes from Astrid's own.

"Alright ye two, 'at's enough. Let's get started!" Gobber stated, stepping between the two and bringing attention back to himself, "Th' recruit who does th' best will win th' honor o' killin' his or her first dragon in front o' th' entire village."

"Hiccup, Fishlegs and Merida already killed a Night Fury, so does that disqualify them?" Snotlout joked, causing Ruffnut and Tuffnut to laugh as Hiccup sighed while Merida turned to glare at Snotlout and Fishlegs walked over to their side as the other teens moved away.

"Hey guys!" he said, a smile on his face so contagious that Hiccup and Merida couldn't help but return it, "I can't believe you got in! What happened?"

"Guess Gobber talked to my dad and got him to change his mind," Hiccup explained with a shrug.

"Your dad can change his mind about things?" Fishlegs questioned in surprise.

"Trust me, Ah was jist as surprised as ye are," Merida answered.

"Figures he changes his mind after I don't want it anymore," Hiccup states with a sigh.

"I know what you mean," Fishlegs groaned, "I feel bad about it to after what happened with the Night Fury, but there's no way I could tell my dad I didn't want to do dragon training anymore. He's already mad enough because I've been hanging out with you guys."

"Sorry about that, bud," Hiccup apologized, giving his friend a sad smile.

"Don't worry about it," Fishlegs replied, waving the apology away, "It's nothing I can't handle."

"You sure about that?" Hiccup questioned, not buying what his friend was saying, "I know how your dad can be."

"Trust me," Fishlegs said resolutely, "I can handle it."

"All right ye three, come along," Gobber said as he walked over to the trio of teenagers and began to lead them over towards the others, "Now, keep yer wits about ye an' stick together. A Vikings anly as good as th' man or woman standin' next tae him. Got it?"

The three nodded in affirmation, earning a smile from Gobber.

"'At's whit Ah like tae hear," Gobber stated with a smile, "Ah got a lot o' faith in ye three. Daenae let me down."

The three teenagers shared a nervous glance as Gobber turned away from them in order to address the group as a whole.

"Behind these doors are jist a few o' th' many species ye will learn tae fight," Gobber announced, folding his arms behind his back as he walked past the heavy wooden and iron doors that held the captive dragons.

"Th' Deadly Nadder," Gobber announced, an evil grin on his face.

"Speed eight. Armor sixteen," Fishlegs mumbled to himself, causing Hiccup to sigh and roll his eyes.

"Th' Hideous Zippleback," Gobber continued, indicating to the appropriate door.

"Plus eleven stealth times two," Fishlegs muttered excitedly.

"Th' Monstrous Nightmare," Gobber said forebodingly.

"Firepower fifteen," Fishlegs said louder, drawing glances from Hiccup and Merida.

"Th' Timberjack," Gobber rattled on.

"Speed twelve. Attack ten," Fishlegs stated at a quickened

pace.

"Th' Terrible Terror," Gobber stated.

"Attack eight. Venom twelve!" Fishlegs droned, almost in a trance.

"Cud ye stop 'at, Fishlegs!?" Gobber shouted in annoyance, before turning to the last door and grabbing its release lever, "An' th' Gronckle."

"Jaw strength eight," Fishlegs whispered to Merida, earning a raised eyebrow from the princess.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait!" Snotlout exclaimed, his eyes wide as he stepped forward, "Aren't you going to teach us first?"

"Please, ye've all been trainin' with yer families fer years," Gobber replied, shooting Snotlout an evil grin, "Besides, Ah believe in learnin' on th' job."

With that, Gobber pulled down on the lever, releasing the weight holding the door closed and allowing the dragon inside to come bursting out. It was small for a dragon and rather round in shape, almost looking like it was made of four greenish-brown spheres that had been stuck together in a line and covered in yellow spikes. Its head was dominated by a massive mouth filled with razor sharp teeth and topped with a large, round nose. A pair of forward-facing yellow eyes scanned the arena as the Gronckle buzzed around on a pair of small wings that flapped rapidly like an insect's.

"Today is about survival," Gobber stated, the teenagers scattering as the Gronckle's momentum caused it to slam into one of the arena walls where it fell to the ground and scrambled to its stubby feet, "If ye get blasted, ye're dead."

As Gobber spoke, the Gronckle scooped up some large rocks into its maw.

"Quick!" Gobber shouted, "Whit's th' first thing ye're gaein' tae need!?"

"A doctor!?" Hiccup exclaimed.

"Plus five speed!?" Fishlegs guessed, on the verge of panicking.

"A shield!" Merida shouted, rolling her eyes at her friends.

"A shield!" Gobber agreed, "Gae!"

The teenagers all rushed to the edges of the arena, where racks of weapons and, more importantly, shields had been set up. Reaching the edge of the arena first, Merida grabbed a shield and tossed it to Fishlegs, who snagged it out of the air after bobbling it for a moment. She quickly turned around, grabbed another shield and tossed it to Hiccup. Hiccup, however, wasn't nearly as prepared as Fishlegs was and the wooden shield hit him the gut, knocking him to the ground and expelling the air from his lungs.

"Sorry!" Merida exclaimed grabbing a shield of her own, as did Astrid

and Snotlout. Hiccup waved her apology off, coughing violently as Fishlegs pulled him to his feet and stuck the shield in his hands.

"Yer most important piece o' equipment is yer shield!" Gobber explained, "If ye must make a choice between a sword or a shield, take th' shield!"

As the others picked up their shields, Ruffnut and Tuffnut ran over to a pile of shields and each attempted to grab the same shield for themselves.

"Get your hands off my shield!" Tuffnut shouted at his sister as they tried to yank the shield out of one another's hands.

"There's like a million shields!" Ruffnut protested.

"Take that one, it has a flower on it" Tuffnut stated, indicating towards a different shield, "Girls like flowers."

As he said that, Ruffnut managed to yank the shield out of her brother's grasp before smacking him in the face with it.

"Oops, now this one has blood on it," Ruffnut quipped, laughing at her brother.

Tuffnut growled in anger and grabbed the shield again, attempting to wrench it out of his sister's grip. Before he could though, the Gronckle came buzzing by, fire a fireball at them. The fireball hit the shield, shattering it and sending the twins spinning to the ground.

"Tuffnut! Ruffnut!" Gobber shouted, "Ye're out!"

"What?" the twins asked shakily as they pushed themselves to their feet.

"Those shields are good fer another thin'! Noise!" Gobber continued, "Make lots o' it an' throw off a dragon's aim!"

Hiccup, Merida, Fishlegs, Astrid and Snotlout began banging their weapons against their shields, the loud clanging noise confusing the Gronckle, and causing it to hover in the middle of the arena in a daze.

"All dragons hae a limited number o' shots!" Gobber instructed, "How many does a Gronckle hae?"

"Five?" Snotlout guessed.

"No, six!" Fishlegs exclaimed confidently as he stopped banging on his shield.

"Yes, six!" Gobber agreed, "One fer each o' ye!"

"What?" Fishlegs questioned, not noticing the Gronckle eyeing him dangerously.

"Fishlegs! Get down!" Merida shouted, before barreling into him with her shield, sending them both sprawling across the ground as the

Gronckle shot a fireball at them, striking the ground where Fishlegs had been standing a moment before.

"There," Merida said with a smile, patting Fishlegs on the shoulder as they picked themselves up, "Now we're even."

"Thanks!" Fishlegs replied, before turning his attention back towards the action, "Hiccup, you okay!?"

As Fishlegs asked, the Gronckle fired a shot in Hiccup's direction, which the Viking teen barely managed to scoot around.

"Oh yeah, great!" Hiccup shot back sarcastically, "Best day of my life!"

On the other side of the arena, Astrid and Snotlout stood side by side, watching the Gronckle hesitantly.

"So, looks like it's just you and me against the losers," Snotlout stated with a chuckle, shooting a glance towards Astrid.

"Nope, just you," Astrid replied before flipping away as the Gronckle shot a fireball at them. Snotlout's eyes widen in shock and he managed to get his shield up in time to block the fireball, the blast knocking him off his feet and sent him rolling across the ground in a shower of splinters.

"Snotlout!" Gobber called with a laugh, "Ye're done!"

"All right, lads," Merida said as she, Hiccup and Fishlegs stood in a triangle formation facing the Gronckle as it hovered in the middle of the arena with Astrid on the other side, "Remember what Gobber said. Jist stick taegether an' we'll be fine."

The boys nodded as they watched the Gronckle wearily. The dragon turned to face Astrid who was bouncing on her toes in anticipation of the dragon firing another shot. Snarling, the Gronckle charged at her, its maw open wide. Astrid dodged out of the way a split second too late, the Gronckle sideswiping her and sending her spinning to the ground, her shield sliding out of her hands and across the arena floor.

Shaking her head clear, Astrid turned to see the Gronckle swinging around to face her, smoke rising from behind its fangs. Merida watched in surprise as she saw Astrid scrambling for her shield. Glancing back towards the Gronckle, she saw the dragon barreling down on the Viking girl. She glanced back at Astrid, and realized that she wouldn't reach her shield in time. Merida's brow furrowed as she seemed to debate with herself before growling in frustration and tossing her shield and axe to the ground.

"Mer?" Hiccup asked, looking at her in confusion, "What are you doing?"

"Somethin' Ah will probably regret," Merida grumbled as she unslung her bow, drew an arrow, notched it and aimed it at the Gronckle as it bared down on Astrid, looking ready to swallow her whole. Taking a deep breath and narrowing her eyes, she loosed the arrow, hitting the Gronckle in the side, the iron arrow head digging into the dragon's tough hide, causing it to screech in pain as it flew past Astrid and

changed its trajectory so that it was flying straight at Merida.

"Damn," she whispered to herself, her eyes widening as she watched the angry dragon charge towards her.

"Merida move!" Gobber shouted as Merida tossed her bow to the side before scooping up her shield and holding it up just as the Gronckle shot a fireball at her. The blast hit her shield dead on, smashing the shield and sending Merida flying through the air in a storm of splinters and sparks. Hitting the ground with a grunt of pain, Merida rolled across the hard stone as the Gronckle chased after her, its teeth shinning against the glowing fire in its belly. Rolling to a stop, Merida lifted her head up only to find the Gronckle only a few feet away from her, roaring as it moved to bite her in half.

"Merida!" Hiccup shouted, running over as fast as he could and leaping at the Gronckle, dropping his axe to grab the shield with both hands as he slammed it into the dragon while throwing all of his weight behind it. The resulting force budged the dragon barely an inch as Hiccup bounced off the Gronckle and fell hard onto his back, the shield rolling away. Despite the lack of force behind the blow, it still managed to catch the Gronckle's attention, causing it to stop, land and turn towards him, growling angrily.

"Hiccup!" Merida screamed in fear as she scrambled to her feet.

"Oh boy," Hiccup whispered as the Gronckle crawled towards him, looking ready to bite a chunk out of his hide.

"I got you, bud!" Hiccup heard Fishlegs shout from behind him before he felt one of his friend's large hands wrap around the back of Hiccup's vest before dragging him across the ground as Fishlegs stepped between him and the dragon. Before the Gronckle could react, Fishlegs stepped forward and swung his hammer at dragon and hit it hard across the jaw, sending it reeling back a few feet.

"Fishlegs, whit in Thor's name are ye daein'!?" Gobber demanded as he watched the large teen in shock.

"I don't know!" Fishlegs shouted back, shrugging as he scooped up Hiccup's dropped shield with his free hand, "Improvising!?"

Before he could say anything more, the Gronckle rounded on Fishlegs, biting at him with its massive jaws. Taking a quick step back, Fishlegs avoided the attack before countering by slamming his shield against the dragon's nose. As the Gronckle stumbled back, Fishlegs pressed his advantage and hit the dragon on the jaw with his hammer again, before following up with a backhand that sent the Gronckle completely reeling.

"Keep on it, Fishlegs!" Merida shouted encouragingly as she helped Hiccup to his feet, "Daenae give 'at lug o' meat an inch!"

As the Gronckle shook its head clear, it turned back towards Fishlegs, snarling viciously at the Viking. Before it could attack him though, Fishlegs began to bang his hammer against his shield, the loud noise dazing the Gronckle. Pushing his advantage, Fishlegs leapt forward, slamming his shield against the dragon's face again, sending

the Gronckle stumbling back some more. Spinning around, Fishlegs swung his hammer up, hitting the Gronckle on its jaw, the force of the blow forcing the dragon onto its hind legs and nearly knocking it onto its back.

Trying to continue his attack, Fishlegs thrust his shield at the Gronckle, but was stopped when the Gronckle snapped its jaw at him and bit into the shield. Fishlegs struggled with the Gronckle for a few moments before the dragon wrenched the shield off his arm. The Gronckle thrashed around for a second before tossing the shield aside, sending it crashing into the wall. Fishlegs looked on in surprise, leaving him off guard as the Gronckle slammed head first into him, knocking Fishlegs off his feet before slamming him to the ground. Pinning him to the arena floor with one of its heavy feet, the Gronckle snarled at him for a moment, its yellow eyes locking with his blue. For a split second, Fishlegs and the Gronckle merely stared at each other. Then, just as suddenly, a light began to glow in the back of the Gronckle's throat as it opened its mouth wide and pointed it at Fishlegs.

Before the Gronckle could fire the blast though, Gobber's hook-hand suddenly shot out and hooked into the dragon's mouth before yanking it to the side, causing the Gronckle's shot to go wide, slamming into the ground next to Fishleg's head in a shower of sparks and stone shrapnel.

"An' 'at's six," Gobber muttered as he began to drag the Gronckle away from Fishlegs and towards its pen, "Now, gae back tae bed, ye overgrown sausage!"

With that, Gobber spun around before hammer tossing the Gronckle into its pen, smashing it against the back wall of the pen. As the dragon recovered, Gobber rushed over and slammed the doors shut before sealing them.

"Ah think 'at might be enough trainin' fer taeday," Gobber sighed as he leaned against the door.

"Now that was some serious dragon fighting," Hiccup said with a smile as he and Merida walked over and helped Fishlegs to his feet, Merida slinging her bow back around her shoulders "You literally pulled my bacon out of the fire back there."

"Ah'm sorry tae admit Ah didn't think ye had it in ye, Fishlegs" Merida added with a chuckle, "Glad ye proved me wrong."

"Hey!" Astrid shouted, catching their attentions as she stomped over towards them, pointing at Merida "What the Hel was that back there!?"

"Whit?" Merida asked incredulously, "Are ye talkin' about th' part where Ah saved yer bloody life? Because if ye are, this is a terrible way tae say thank ye."

"I didn't need your damned help," Astrid spat, glaring at Merida, "I had it under control."

"Aye, keep tellin' yerself 'at," Merida replied, rolling her eyes at the other girl.

"At least she did better than Useless over here," Snotlout spoke up, indicating towards Hiccup, "Did you see him knock himself on his own ass?"

"At least he got a hit in, which is a lot better than I could say about you or the twins, Snotface," Fishlegs said, pointing a finger at Snotlout, earning a glare from him and the twins.

"Oh so you go toe to toe with one Gronckle and suddenly you're the big man in the village?" Tuffnut questioned with a snort, Ruffnut nodding in agreement "Don't make me laugh. I saw you almost get pasted back there!"

Before he knew what had happened, Hiccup saw the group of teenagers before him turn into an angry tangle of pointing fingers and shouting voices. So loud was everyone that he couldn't pick up more than fragments of what anyone person was saying. Sighing, he began messaging his temples as he scrunched his eyes close, feeling his own annoyance threatening to bubble over. Suddenly, his eyes shot back open as he glared angrily at the group before him.

"QUIET!" he bellowed, immediately silencing the group of teenagers as he caught them all off guard, causing them to openly stare at him in shock.

"Don't you all see that if we had actually tried to work together, we probably could have beat that Gronckle?" he asked, "Instead we worked on our own and all got knocked on our asses and now we're standing here arguing about it! We're supposed to be learning how to fight them, not each other!"

The group stared at Hiccup for a few moments, each of them trying to digest what he had said. After a moment, Snotlout rolled his eyes and shook his head dismissively.

"Whatever, I'm not being told what to do by a loser like you," he growled, before turning and walking away, the twins following him after shooting Hiccup a dirty glare.

Astrid watched them go for a few moments before turning to look Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs. After a moment, she sighed out of her nose.

"Look, I get what you're saying, Hiccup," Astrid stated, looking at her feet, "And I suppose you're right. But this isn't about working together, and holding hands and all that garbage. It's about proving ourselves, and proving which one of us is the best. I will prove that I am the best. And none of you are going to stand in my way."

Taking a step back, she gave each of them an appraising look.

"Still, you all did better than the others," she admitted, before turning to look at Merida, "Even you."

"Thanksâ€¦Ah guess," Merida replied uncertainly, eyeing Astrid suspiciously.

"Don't mention it," Astrid stated, her eyes narrowing, "Seriously, don't mention it. To anyone."

Merida and Hiccup shared a quick glance as Astrid began to walk away, before she paused and turned back to face them.

"Oh, and Fishlegs," she said, giving the young man another appraising look before smirking, "You really were pretty impressive today."

"Umâ€¦thanks?" Fishlegs replied as Astrid turned and walked away without another word.

"Whit was 'at about?" Merida questioned.

"I have no idea," Fishlegs admitted.

"Nae bad fer yer first day o' trainin', ye lot," Gobber said as he wandered over to the trio, before turning to address Hiccup and Fishlegs, "Ah was especially impressed with ye two."

"What?" Hiccup asked in confusion, "I mean I understand why you'd be impressed with Fishlegs, but what did I do?"

"True, ye werenae th' best when it came tae fightin' th' Gronckle," Gobber admitted with a nod, "It's whit ye did afterwards 'at impressed me."

"What do you mean?" Hiccup asked in confusion.

"When Ah was in dragon trainin' with yer parents an' uncle, we all faced th' same problem," Gobber explained, "None o' us wanted tae work taegether. Yer father was a bit o' a blowhard back in those days, an' liked tae throw his weight around. Spiteloutâ€¦well, he was a lot like Snotlout. An' Berthaâ€¦well, she was a lot like Astrid. An' I had more than a few thin's tae prove. Sae, ye can imagine it didnae take much fer us tae devolve intae shoutin' matches like th' ane ye lot had taeday. If it werenae fer ane person, we probably wudnae hae made it through trainin' without killin' each other."

"Who was 'at person?" Merida questioned.

"Hiccup's mother," Gobber stated, pointing at Hiccup, "Val was always th' one brokerin' peace when tempers flared an' words got heated. Ah can see she passed 'at on tae ye, Hiccup. It's good tae see it again, 'at compassion, because it's somethin' 'at this village has been lackin' since she passed."

Hiccup smiled at Gobber as the large man placed his good hand on the young man's shoulder.

"As much as Ah hate tae admit it, nae every fight can be won with fire an' steel," Gobber stated, a smile on his face, "Yer mother taught me 'at, sae daenae ye gae forgettin' it."

"I won't," Hiccup replied, smiling back, before glancing at Merida as he felt her slip her hand into his and give it a squeeze.

"Good," Gobber said as he began to lead them out of the arena, "An' ane more lesson 'at Ah shud impart on ye after taeday. Ye hae tae be on yer toes, because a dragon will always gae fer th'

kill."

"Always?" Merida questioned.

"Always," Gobber answered seriously before turning and heading out of the arena, not noticing the three teenagers share a meaningful look with one another.

A/N: So this chapter got away from me a little bit, but I had fun writing it. I hope you guys like the changes I made to the first dragon lesson as well as the other scenes. As always, critiques and feedback is always welcome so please review! Later!

16. The Weakest Link

Chapter 16: The Weakest Link

"A dragon always goes for the kill," Hiccup repeated Gobber's words from earlier that morning as he examined the remains of the bola on the forest floor, "So, why didn't you?"

Standing up, he turned to face Merida and Fishlegs who were standing behind him, observing the surrounding area.

"Looks like it went this way," Merida stated, pointing in the direction of the broken foliage where they had seen the Night Fury disappear.

"What's the point of looking for it anyway?" Fishlegs questioned, "I mean it probably flew off yesterday. Why would it hang around?"

"Call it a hunch," Hiccup replied with a shrug, "Something seemed off about the way it was flying. Besides, what do we have to lose by checking?"

"I guess you're right," Fishlegs replied with a shrug of his own.

Turning to Merida, Hiccup motioned for her to take the lead.

"You were telling me about how your dad used to take you on hunting trips, right?" Hiccup asked, smiling at her, "You think you can take the lead on this?"

"Well, Ah'm nae sure Ah can track such an elusive creature," Merida deadpanned as she indicated towards the very obvious trail of destruction the Night Fury had left in its wake.

"I have faith in you, o mighty huntress," Hiccup joked, patting Merida on the shoulder, causing her to chuckle and roll her eyes at him.

"Come on then," she said, motioning for the boys to follow her. Hiccup began to, before noticing that Fishlegs wasn't following. Turning around, he found the larger boy looking off into space with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Huntress," Fishlegs whispered to himself, seemingly deep in

thought.

"Fishlegs?" Hiccup asked with concern, "You okay, bud?"

"Huh?" Fishlegs said, snapping back to reality before shaking his head, "Yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking. I'm right behind you guys."

"Alright," Hiccup replied with a smirk as he and Merida began making their way into the woods down the path the Night Fury had gone, "Just don't get lost in the woods while you're lost in thought."

"Don't worry," Fishlegs replied with a chuckle before another thoughtful look crossed his face as he followed them, "I'm with you guys."

The trio walked through the woods for a few minutes, Merida in the lead, following the various signs of something large having gone crashing through the forest the day before. Eventually, they came to a large rock wall with evidence that the Night Fury had gone over it. Finding a crevice in the rock wall that they could fit through, the three made their way through it, coming to a small, isolated valley largely dominated by a large pond being fed by a small waterfall coming over the wall on the opposite side from them.

"Ah daenae see anythin' else," Merida said as she scanned the valley, "Looks like th' trail ends here."

"Damn," Hiccup swore, "So much for that idea."

"What are those?" Fishlegs questioned, indicating towards something lying on the ground.

Looking down, they noticed what looked like black flakes on the ground. Kneeling down, Merida picked one up to examine it closer.

"It looks like-" she began but was interrupted when a large shadow suddenly shot by the crevice with a loud roar, startling the three teens. Quickly moving back, they watched as the Night Fury tried to claw its way up the sheer cliff side that surrounded the valley, before falling and swooping over the lake, crashing onto the opposite bank from where the trio hid, watching. They slowly stood up, taking a step out of the crevice before looking at each other, each wearing matching looks of excitement and wonder.

Looking around, they spotted a lower ledge that they could reach and get a better look at what the Night Fury was doing. As they lay on their bellies and crawled up to the precipice of the ledge, the Night Fury leapt into the air and started flying, only to come crashing back down a second later.

Reaching into his vest, Hiccup pulled out his sketchbook, watching the Night Fury as it tried, apparently in vain, to escape the valley while doing a quick sketch of it on one of the blank pages.

"Why doesn't it just fly away?" Fishlegs questioned as they watched the Night Fury blast the ground in apparent frustration.

"Look," Merida whispered, pointing at the Night Fury, specifically

its tail, "It looks like it's supposed tae hae two fins on its tail, bit it anly has ane."

"It must need both to stabilize itself in the air," Hiccup hypothesized as they watched the Night Fury glide awkwardly to the other side of the pond and begin trying to snatch fish out of the water while Hiccup erased the missing tailfin from his sketch, "It can't fly straight without them. It must have lost one whenâ€¦when I shot it out it down."

A sad look crossed Hiccup's face as he spoke, catching Merida's attention while Fishlegs watched the Night Fury in wonder. Reaching out, she ran her hand through his hair and stroked his cheek with her thumb. Hiccup turned to look at her in surprise, a bright blush crossing his face. Merida blushed in turn, a shy smile on her face as she pulled her hand back and looked away. Smiling, Hiccup set his pencil down before reaching out and placing his hand on hers, causing her to look back at him and smile.

Unbeknownst to either of them however, the pencil had begun rolling towards the edge of the ledge. Noticing it at the last minute, Hiccup turned and reached out for it, his eyes wide with fear, but missed it and the pencil went tumbling off the ledge, clattering to the ground. Noticing the pencil fall and hearing it hit the ground. Slowly, the Night Fury lifted its head, catching sight of the three teenagers watching it. It stared at them with an even gaze. Specifically, it stared at Hiccup, holding his gaze as the young man sat up straighter while the Night Fury tilted its head to the side.

"I zink he likes you," a new, yet familiar voice said from behind them said, causing them all to jump and almost sending Hiccup tumbling over the ledge. Turning around, they found Hilde standing behind them, watching them with a bemused smile as her pet raven cawed at them.

"Hilde!" Merida exclaimed in surprise, holding her hand over heart, "Whit are ye daein' here!?"

"I'm assumink for zee same reason you all are," Hilde replied before indicating to the Night Fury, which was still watching them wearily, "I found zee pas of destruction zat zis majestic creature left in its vake and followed it here. I take it you sree are zee reason it's shtuck in zis falley?"

"Yeah," Hiccup sighed, "It's my fault specifically."

"Fault implies you feel guilty about your actions," Hilde observed, "I sought zis is vhat you vanted. After all, no one has ever managed to take down a Night Fury before. Vhat changed?"

"I realized it wasn't some monster, something that needed to be killed," Hiccup explained, "It was scared. Just like I was."

"So you couldn't do it," Hilde observed with an enigmatic smile.

"Basically," Hiccup replied with a shrug.

"So Vhat brings you here?" Hilde asked.

"I wanted to know more about it," Hiccup explained, "It had a chance to kill me and Merida, but it didn't take it."

"Curious indeed," Hilde agreed.

"Hilde, dae ye know anythin' aboot dragons?" Merida questioned.

"Better zan most, I can assure you," Hilde replied, "And let me tell you, zere is more to dragons zen vhat your elders hafe taught you, or even vhat zeir elders taught zem."

"So do you think there's a reason the Night Fury spared us," Hiccup questioned.

"Oh yes, of course," Hilde answered like it was the most obvious thing in the world, "Dragons are much smarter zan your run of zee mill animal. Zey hardly efer do anyzing wisout zere beink a reason for it."

"What do you think that reason is?" Hiccup asked.

"Zat, dear Reiter, is for you to find out," Hilde answered enigmatically, "But I tire of talks of dragons. Schall vee return to my home for a cup of tea? Zere is somezing I found zat I wisched to schow you."

With that, Hilde turned and made her way through the crevice without another word. Merida and Hiccup looked at each other before shrugging and following. Fishlegs hung back for a moment before sighing and following as well.

The small group spent a few minutes moving through the brush. Eventually, they came to a part of the woods that none of the teens could recognize, and, sure enough, a moment later when they came out of the brush, they found themselves standing before the mysterious stone circle. The sight of the structure still sent chill down their spines, and the teen did their best to hurry along past it as they made their way to Hilde's home.

"Sae, whit is it 'at ye wanted tae show us, Hilde?" Merida asked as they entered Hilde's simple home.

"Vell, after zee little trainink session you sree had here, I got to sinking, and I remembered somesing one of you might find useful," Hilde explained as she walked over to the corner of her workroom and began rummaging through some of her things.

"Who?" Fishlegs questioned, flinching as Hilde's pet crow landed on the table in front of him and cawed at him.

"Hiccup," Hilde answered before pulling out a long object bundled in cloth and turning to face them.

"What is that?" Hiccup questioned.

"Take it and see," Hilde instructed, holding it out for him to take. Hesitantly reaching out, Hiccup took the bundle before slowly unwrapping it, Merida and Fishlegs walking over to his side and looking over his shoulder. All three gasped in surprise when they saw

what was inside.

Sitting in Hiccup's hands, surrounded by its clothe wrapping, was a sword. The finely polished metal gleamed in the flickering firelight, so reflective that Hiccup could see his reflection looking back at him from the blade. The sword looked strange to him, so different than the longswords and broadswords he had made with Gobber. It was shorter, looking like Hiccup himself could hold it one handed, while someone his father size would use it as little more than a dagger. It had a wavy curve to it as well, looking like it was designed for cutting, though the blade came to a dangerous point all the same. The handle was wrapped in fine leather while a runic word was carved into the blade.

"It's beautiful," Merida whispered, covering her mouth with her hand in shock.

"You want to give thisâ€¦to me?" Hiccup questioned in astonishment, looking at Hilde with a surprised look on his face.

"It vill serve you better zan me," Hilde replied with a shrug, smiling gently at Hiccup, "I have zee scabbard around here somewhere too."

"Iâ€¦I don't know what to say," Hiccup said, "I don't even know what kind of sword this is."

"It's a saber," Fishlegs said, "A smaller type of sword. Lighter and quicker. They're more popular in the south."

"Ye really dae know everythin'," Merida commented, smiling and raising an eyebrow at Fishlegs who shrugged and smirked in embarrassment.

"Do you mind if I look at it?" Fishlegs asked as he reached out for the sword.

"No, go right ahead," Hiccup replied, handing the sword to his friend.

Gingerly holding the sword up so he could get a better look at the blade, Fishlegs narrowed his eyes at the saber.

"This word written on the blade is Old Norse," Fishlegs stated, "I thinkâ€¦I think it says 'BemÃ¼hen.'"

"BemÃ¼hen?" Merida questioned, "Whit daes 'at mean?"

"I thinkâ€¦I think it meansâ€¦" Fishlegs mumbled before sighing in frustration, "I know I've seen this word before."

"Endeavor," Hilde spoke up, "It means endeavor."

"Endeavor?" Hiccup questioned, "Why does it have the word endeavor written on it?"

"Because it's nae a word," Merida stated, a smirk on her face, "It's a name. Th' sword's name is Endeavor."

Hilde nodded, smiling at Merida.

"Why would you name a sword Endeavor?" Hiccup questioned.

"Any sword vors its salt has a name," Hilde explained, "Give it a try."

Fishlegs handed the sword back to Hiccup, who grasped it by the handle with his left hand and held it out in front of himself.

"Whit dae ye think?" Merida questioned.

"It's reallyâ€¦light," Hiccup commented, twisting the sword in his hand.

"Like I said, they're designed to be light," Fishlegs stated.

"I know, I've just never held a sword this light before," Hiccup explained, "It feelsâ€¦good."

"Fancy a spar?" Merida questioned, a wicked gleam in her eye.

"What?" Hiccup asked, "Right now?"

"Whit's th' point o' gettin' a fancy new sword if ye daenae use it?" Merida inquired as she picked up one of the training swords and gave it a twirl, "Sae, whit dae ye say, Hic? Fancy a gae?"

Hiccup gulped nervously before smiling uncertainly at the princess.

A few minutes later, Hiccup and Merida stood facing each other in the clearing outside Hilde's home, Fishlegs and Hilde standing to the side with fresh cups of tea in their hand with Merida's bow and quiver sitting next to them along with Endeavor's rediscovered scabbard.

"Hilde, can I ask you a question?" Fishlegs asked.

"Of course, Leser," Hilde replied, taking a sip from her cup.

"Why do you have that sword?" Fishlegs asked, "It seems very old and very well made."

"When you get to be my age, you realize you've collected all sorts of sings wizout intendink to," Hilde explained without explaining at all.

"Rightâ€¦" Fishlegs said, letting the subject go as he took a sip of his tea, "Can I ask you another question?"

"Yes," Hilde stated, a smirk on her face.

"Doesn't the word jager mean hunter?" Fishlegs asked

"Indeed it does," Hilde answered, eyeing Fishlegs with a raised eyebrow, "Vhy do you vish to know?"

"Just wondering," Fishlegs replied vaguely as he shrugged his shoulders, causing Hilde's smirk to grow.

Meanwhile, Hiccup looked nervously at Merida as he took a few practice swings with Endeavor, the sword flashing in the late afternoon sun as it slashed through the air.

"You sure this is a good idea, Mer?" Hiccup questioned, "I mean, you're better than me, but my sword is made of metal and yours is wood. I don't want to accidentally hurt you or anything."

"Oh, quit yer belly achin'," Merida said dismissively as she slid into a fighting stance, "It will be fine."

"If you say so," Hiccup replied with a sigh before slipping into the stance Merida had taught him.

With that, Merida smirked before rushing at him, her sword raised to strike. Seeing the attack coming, Hiccup lifted Endeavor to block, surprising himself with how quickly he was able to lift the sword. As Merida stabbed at him with the wooden blade, Hiccup parried it, pushing her attack to the side as he stepped around her. Merida quickly caught herself, spinning around and swinging at Hiccup's head, forcing the young man to duck. Merida quickly followed up with a back kick, hitting Hiccup in the chest and knocking him onto his back.

As Hiccup coughed and rubbed his chest, Merida turned and ran at him, her sword raised to bring it down on him. Raising Endeavor defensively, Hiccup managed to parry the blow, the wooden sword connecting with the metal saber with a loud thunk. Merida tried to step back, but her eyes widened in surprise when she found she couldn't pull her sword back. Looking down, she was amazed to see that the force of her attack had dug the metal blade deep into her wooden sword. Seeing Merida pause, Hiccup quickly pulled back on his own sword, tugging Merida down with it. Rolling further onto his back, Hiccup planted both feet on Merida's chest before pushing up as hard as he could with his legs. The force sent Merida into the air, her sword pulling free of Hiccup's before falling on her back with a thud.

"You okay?" Hiccup asked with concern as he stood up.

Merida coughed as she waved off Hiccup's concern, standing up and signaling for him to continue. Nodding his head, Hiccup took the offensive, running at her with Endeavor raised, forcing Merida to block. The two blades met again, only this time there wasn't the thunk of metal wood. Instead, Endeavor cleaved right through the wooden sword, cutting the blade cleanly in two. Merida stumbled away as the top part of her sword fell into the grass with a soft thud. Merida managed to catch herself before lifting the broken sword up and looking at it in shock. Slowly, she turned to face Hiccup, who looked back at her with equal astonishment.

"Whoa," Fishlegs whispered, surprise frozen on his features.

"Ah guess ye win," Merida commented, a bemused smile on her face.

"I guess so," Hiccup replied with a surprised chuckle, looking at Endeavor in wonder.

The sound of applause caught their attention as they turned to find

Hilde clapping her hands.

"What did I tell you, Reiter?" she asked with a grin, "Zat sword is suited for someone like you."

"Thanks Hilde," Hiccup thanked the old woman, "This is really great. I don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anysing, dearie," Hilde replied, "You just need to use zee sword vell."

"I will," Hiccup replied sincerely.

"Good," Hilde said before turning her attention to the sky above, "Now, you sree schould probably be heading back to zee village. It's going to storm soon."

"Whit dae ye mean, Hilde?" Merida asked, turning her attention above as well, "There's nae a cloud in th' sky."

"Trust me, Jager," Hilde replied, "An old voman knows zese sings."

Later,

Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs ran through the village as the storm raged over head, seemingly gallons of water pouring down upon them while lightning cut through the sky and thunder shook the very air. They ran down towards the Great Hall, the great braziers that flanked the large door burning in defiance of the rain. Shoving the heavy door open, the three stumbled inside. Within, there were a few Vikings scattered around, mostly those left behind to protect the village and keep it running, along with some of the women who were not trained in combat. Near the back, they saw the other teenagers gathered having a dinner along with Gobber.

The group made their way over towards the table, Merida doing her best to ring the water out of her hair. Hiccup, meanwhile, adjusted the scabbard on his back, the sword being slightly too long to carry on his waist.

"Alright," they heard Gobber's voice carry over the Hall, "Astrid, whit did ye dae wrong?"

"I was sloppy," Astrid replied as the three walked up to the table and grabbed some plates of food, "I missed my footing and the Gronckle got the better of me. I neededâ€¦"

Astrid paused as she noticed Merida watching her.

"I needed someone's help to bail me out," Astrid finished, turning her attention to her food.

"There's naethin' wrong with needin' help," Gobber explained as he walked around the table as Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs sat at another table, "We're all in this together after all. Still, a chain is anly as strong as its weakest link. We hae tae be hard on ourselves. At's how we get better."

Turning his attention to the trio, Gobber eyed Hiccup, raising an

eyebrow at the sword but not commenting on it.

"Hiccup," he said, catching the young man's attention, "Whit dae ye think ye did wrong?"

"You mean other than the fact he showed up?" Snotlout joked, "Well, I suppose there's also the fact he didn't get eaten."

Snotlout and Tuffnut chuckled at the joke before Gobber slammed his good hand onto the table, startling the two boys into silence.

"Ah asked Hiccup whit he did wrong," Gobber stated, "Nae whit ye think he did wrong. We hae tae be hard on ourselves, nae each other. Sae keep it tae yerself, Snotlout."

Snotlout crossed his arms and grumbled to himself, but didn't say anything more.

"Now Hiccup, whit dae ye think ye did wrong?" Gobber questioned.

"I wasn't where I needed to be," Hiccup stated, "It probably would have helped if I had some extra weight to throw around."

"That's an understatement," Tuffnut joked, but fell silent when Gobber shot him a warning glare.

"Merida, whit did ye dae wrong?" Gobber questioned.

Merida was silent for a few moments, eyeing Astrid.

"Ah dropped ma shield an' left myself open tae attack," Merida said finally, turning her attention back to her food.

"Fishlegs?" Gobber asked.

"I was reckless," Fishlegs said readily, "And I let myself get distracted."

"Very good," Gobber said with a pleased voice, before pulling a book out of his vest and placing it on the table, "Now, whit did th' others dae right?"

"Wait," Tuffnut said, holding up his hand, "You want us to complement each other now?"

"How can someone keep daein' somethin' right if they daenae know whit they're daein' is right?" Gobber asked, the question doing less to mollify Tuffnut and more to confuse him, "Astrid, whit did th' others dae right?"

Astrid looked around the table for a split second, before lowering her eyes to her food and shrugging his shoulders. Gobber sighed before turning his attention to Merida.

"How about ye, Merida?" Gobber asked, "Whit did th' others dae right?"

Merida paused for a second, scanning the table. She could take the easy way out, congratulating Fishlegs for fighting the Gronckle so well one on one, or remembering how many shots the dragon had. Or

complimenting Hiccup on being brave enough to charge the Gronckle. But then she looked at the others. The twins giving her disinterested looks. Snotlout pointedly not looking at her. Astrid watching her out of the corner of her eye. She thought back to what Hiccup had said in the arena, about everyone working together. To what Gobber had just said about them all being in this together. Even Astrid had been willing to offer compliments when she felt they were deserved. Sure, one person could play peacekeeper all day long, but there wasn't going to be any actual peace unless someone actually stepped up and did something. Might as well be her.

"Snotlout was pretty fast on his feet out there. He was on th' ball until he let himself get distracted," she stated nonchalantly as she focused more on her dinner before her, "He was also close tae how many shots th' Gronckle had, seemed like an easy mistake tae make."

The whole table was dead quiet as they all openly stared at Merida in surprise, Gobber included.

"At'sâ€|at's very good, Merida," Gobber congratulated her, chuckling in a mixture of happiness and surprise.

"Umâ€|yeah," Snotlout added, "Thanks, I guess."

"Whit about ye, Snotlout?" Gobber asked, turning his attention to the young man, "Who dae ye think did well taeday?"

"Wellâ€|I got to admit," Snotlout said, an awkward smile on his face, "Fishlegs was pretty badass when he took on that Gronckle all by himself."

"Very good," Gobber stated, "Fishlegs?"

"The twins were good about keeping their cool in the beginning," Fishlegs stated.

"Ruff, Tuff?" Gobber continued.

"All right, let's be honest, it was pretty sick when Hiccup checked that dragon with his shield," Ruffnut stated with a smirk, her brother slowly nodding in agreement.

"Hiccup?" Gobber asked, his smile growing.

"Astrid was really mobile out there," Hiccup said readily, "Way more than I could be."

"Astrid?" Gobber questioned, raising his eyebrow at the Viking girl.

Astrid paused for a moment, lifting her eyes for a moment to meet Merida's gaze.

"I wouldn't want to be caught downfield of that bow," Astrid stated after a moment before turning her attention back to her food, ignoring the small smirk that had formed on Merida's face as the others voiced their agreement.

"Very good, all o' ye," Gobber said happily, beaming at his students,

"There's hope fer ye lot yet."

As Gobber finished, thunder boomed from outside, drawing his attention towards the ceiling.

"Wonae be an attack taenight," he stated as he began to walk away, "Rest up. Ah'll see ye lot in th' mornin'."

The teens bid Gobber goodnight before they slowly began to finish their meals. As they did, Ruffnut rested her head on her hand as she looked quizzically at Hiccup.

"All right, I've got to ask," she spoke up after a moment, drawing the others' attentions, "Where did the sword come from?"

"Oh uh this?" Hiccup asked nervously, "Iâ€¦um, made it."

"You made that?" Tuffnut asked, surprised.

"Hiccup's an amazin' weaponsmith," Merida quickly spoke up, unslinging her bow before placing it on the table, "He made ma bow too."

"Whoa really?" Ruffnut asked in wonder, hesitantly reaching out, "Can I touch it?"

A quick instance of panic shot through Merida as she shot a glance at Astrid, who was watching her in turn. Bringing her attention back to Ruffnut though, all she saw in the other girl's eyes was genuine interest.

"Um, yeah, sure," she said hesitantly after a moment, which was all the permission Ruffnut needed to scoop the bow off the table and hold it in front of her. She looked at the bow in wonder, Tuffnut wearing a matching expression as he looked over her shoulder at the weapon. Even Snotlout leaned in to get a closer look.

"These carvings are sick," Ruffnut said, running her thumb over them as she lifted her eyes to look at Hiccup, "You really made this?"

"Uh, yeahâ€¦" Hiccup replied, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment, "Got the wood from the forest and everything."

"Sweet," Ruffnut whispered in appreciation as she turned her attention back to the bow.

"How far does it shoot?" Tuffnut questioned.

"Ah daenae really know," Merida replied with a shrug, "We've ne'er really tried tae see."

"Guessing pretty far with how hard it hit that Gronckle this morning," Astrid spoke up, earning a raised eyebrow from Merida, to which Astrid replied with a shrug.

"Let's see the sword," Tuffnut said, nodding towards Hiccup as Ruffnut handed Merida her bow back.

"Yeah, come on cuz, let's see what you got," Snotlout encouraged, catching Hiccup off guard because it lacked the mocking tone that so often accompanied anything Snotlout ever said to him.

"Sure, okay," Hiccup replied before reaching up and unsheathing Endeavor, the light from torches scattered around the hall gleaming off the polished steel. Hiccup held it out over the table allowing the others to appreciate it.

"Whoa, no way," Snotlout whispered in wonder.

"You made that?" Tuffnut questioned.

"Uh, yeah," Hiccup lied awkwardly.

"What type of sword is it?" Ruffnut questioned.

"It's a saber, a light sword from down south," Hiccup explained, "Fishlegs told me about them."

"Figures you'd have to build yourself a light weapon to use," Snotlout mocked, the old tone coming back in full force.

"I wouldn't joke about that, Snotlout," Astrid said, looking intently at the sword, "I mean sure, it doesn't pack the same punch as a broadsword, but look at that edge. It looks like it could cut through muscle and bone like a hot knife through butter."

Snotlout's eyes widened as he thought about the implications.

"Care to give it a try, cuz?" Hiccup joked, tilting the blade towards Snotlout, which caused the other boy to lean back in fear.

"How about he put a rain check on that," Snotlout replied as he carefully reached up and pushed the blade away with his finger.

"What's that written on the blade?" Tuffnut asked.

"Oh it's the sword's name," Hiccup explained, pulling the sword back and laying it on the table, "It's the Old Norse word for endeavor."

"Why does your sword have a name?" Ruffnut questioned.

"Every sword worth its salt has a name," Hiccup replied, echoing Hilde's earlier sentiment.

"Nice," Ruffnut stated, before turning her attention towards Merida, "Does your bow have a name?"

"Not yet," Merida replied, looking at her bow thoughtfully, "Haven't put too much thought into it yet."

"Well, if I had a bow that cool, I would name it something sick like Deathbringer or Black Rose or something like that," Ruffnut said excitedly.

"Those are terrible names," Tuffnut commented.

"Your face is terrible," Ruffnut replied before grabbing her brother's head and slamming it against the table, the recoil of which caused him to fall out of his chair and onto his back on the hard stone floor.

"Well, with that said, I think it's time I called it a night," Astrid stated as she pushed herself away from the table and stood up while Tuffnut pulled himself to his feet, "I'll see you all tomorrow."

"Yeah, we should be going too," Hiccup added as he stood up along with Fishlegs and Merida. The group bid everyone a slightly awkward goodnight before making their way out of the Great Hall. The trio paused for a moment outside the door, watching the storm raging outside.

"Well, 'at wasâ€|different," Merida stated after a moment.

"Yeah, you could say that again," Fishlegs agreed.

"What made you say those things, Mer?" Hiccup questioned.

"Ah was jist thinkin' aboot whit ye an' Gobber had said earlier an' decided tae put it intae practice," Merida explained.

"Nice work, Mer," Hiccup stated, reaching down and taking Merida's hand in his before giving it a squeeze.

"Ah dae whit Ah can," Merida replied with a smile.

"Well, before this gets any mushier, I should be heading back home. My mom is probably up waiting for me," Fishlegs stated before running off into the storm, "See you guys tomorrow!"

"See you!" Merida and Hiccup called after him, before turning and smiling at one another.

"We should be getting back too," Hiccup stated.

"Alright," Merida replied before grabbing Hiccup's hand and dragging him out into the rain, laughing as he let out a shout of surprise before laughing too. Together, the two ran up the hill towards their house. Reaching it, Hiccup threw the door open and rushed in, Merida quickly following him as he held the door open for her.

"Ugh, remind me ne'er tae doubt Hilde aboot th' weather again," Merida said as she began to ring out her hair for the second time that night.

"Sure thing," Hiccup replied with a chuckle as he made his way over towards the fireplace, "Here, let me get a fire going so we can dry off."

"Excellent idea," Merida said as she moved over towards him as Hiccup kneeled down in front of the fireplace, coaxing the flames to life. Merida sat on the floor a few feet from the fire and Hiccup scooted backwards to sit next to her.

"So, today was eventful," Hiccup joked as he leaned back on his hands, causing Merida to chuckle at his understatement.

"Ye cud say 'at," Merida agreed with a chuckle as she brought her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around her legs.

Hiccup smiled as he felt himself relax in a way that he only seemed to be able to around Merida. Everything seemed to have been going better for him lately, and every time he thought about it, it all lead back to Merida coming into his life.

"Hiccup?" Merida spoke up, snapping Hiccup back to reality.

"Um, yeah?" Hiccup asked awkwardly.

"Can Ah ask ye about somethin'?" Merida questioned nervously.

"Sure, what do you want to know?" Hiccup inquired.

"Ah was wondering, if it's nae pryin' too much 'at is, if ye cud tell me about yer mother?" Merida asked, biting her lip as she looked at Hiccup anxiously.

"Oh," Hiccup replied quietly as his face fell a little.

"I mean ye daenae hae tae if ye daenae want tae!" Merida said quickly, holding her hands up to stop him before covering her face with them, "Och, Ah'm sorry. Ah shudnae hae said anythin'."

"No really, it's okay," Hiccup reassured her, smiling at her antics, "It's just, nobody's really asked about her in a long time."

Slowly, Merida lowered her hands and looked at Hiccup, who gave her a small smile.

"So, what would you like to know?" Hiccup asked.

"What was she like?" Merida asked hesitantly.

"Her name was Valhallarama, if you can believe that. She was a big woman, as you may have guessed, a real Viking woman as my dad used to say," Hiccup explained before smirking, "And before you ask, no I don't understand how two big people like that could make someone like me."

Merida chuckled at the joke before urging him to continue.

"I take after my dad more than her," Hiccup explained, "She looked a lot more like Snotlout and his dad, with black hair and the like. But at the same time she was so different from them. Gobber was right, she had a way about her that made people get along. She was the only person who could calm my dad when he got angry. I mean, don't get me wrong, she could be tough when she needed to be, but most of the time, she was always soâ€¦kind."

Hiccup smiled warmly as he looked at Merida.

"I think she would have really liked you, Mer," Hiccup stated, looking her right in the eyes.

"Ye really think sae?" Merida asked hopefully.

"I do," Hiccup replied, smiling warmly at her.

Merida smiled back as she brushed slightly. Her face fell though as a thought occurred to her.

"How did sheâ€¦" Merida trailed off, unable to finish her question.

"Die?" Hiccup finished, his face becoming neutral as he turned his attention towards the fire, "Dragon attack. At least that was the original story."

"Whit dae ye mean?" Merida asked, slightly weary.

"She died during a dragon attack," Hiccup explained, his voice quiet, "She was helping rescue some children from a building on the cliffs that had been lit on fire by a Monstrous Nightmare. There were men fighting the dragon outside. They said that the dragon swept its tail and took out a wall of the building, which sent the whole thing plunging over the cliff. My mother went over the side with the children. They found her body on the rocks down below with one of the children. They were lucky they got to them before the ocean washed them out to sea. They assumed that they had been knocked over along with the dragon."

"'At's horrible, Hiccup," Merida sympathized, gently reaching out and placing her hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah, it would be," Hiccup said evenly, though his eyes narrowed, "Except that's not how it happened."

"Whit are ye getting' at, Hiccup?" Merida questioned, confusion on her face.

"The dragon didn't knock her over the cliff," Hiccup explained, his eyes still trained on the fire, "Somebody pushed her off with the child."

"â€¦Whit?" Merida whispered, shocked.

"He used the dragon attack as a cover and opportunity to kill her," Hiccup explained, his hands clenching into fists, "She had gotten the children out of the building, was about to urge them to safety when the Nightmare destroyed the building and startled her. That's when he struck, pushing her over the cliff with the children."

"H-How dae ye know this?" Merida questioned, visibly upset by the story.

"Because the fall didn't kill both children," Hiccup explained, his brow furrowing "The one who survived, a little girl, had her fall broken by my mother. The fall shattered her legs but she was able to crawl into a cave in the cliff wall. She stayed there until one of the men, Bucket actually, stumbled upon her there a few days later. She explained the whole thing, but by then the village had already found out."

"How?" Merida asked.

"Because he tried to kill my dad," Hiccup explained, "Turns out he

wanted to become the chief of the village and was going to kill me and my family to do it. Unfortunately for him, the village was loyal to my dad and he failed. He got away from the village before they could take him to justice."

"Sae, th' man who killed yer mother is still out there?" Merida asked, horrorstruck.

"Yeah, he is," Hiccup stated, glaring at the fire as it danced in the fireplace, "And one day, I'm going to find him. That's part of the reason I wanted to be trained so bad, wanted to be included. So the villagers would help me find him and teach me what to do when I did. It's weird, even with everything that's happened, that hasn't changed. Even though I couldn't bring myself to kill the Night Fury, I still want to see that man dead."

"He killed yer mother, Hiccup," Merida said, looking at him in concern, "It's anly natural ye want tae see him pay fer it."

"I guess," Hiccup sighed, finally turning from the fire and looking at Merida, the anger flowing out of his eyes, leaving only sadness in its wake, "He was their friend, you know. Went to dragon training with them. My parents. My uncle. Gobber. He knew them all. They said he was friendly. Unassuming. From a poor family. They said all he really wanted to do was make a name for himself. I guess he got his wish."

Merida leaned over and rested her head on Hiccup's shoulder as she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into a hug, Hiccup leaning into her as they turned and watched the fire together.

"There's no one in the Norselands who doesn't know the name Alvin the Treacherous."

A/N: So this ended up being longer and more involved then I originally intended. Lots of plot details and backstory provided, hope you guys liked it! Also, any suggestions to what the name for Merida's bow should be are welcome. As always critiques and feedback are always welcome, so please review! Later!

17. Walls Come Down

Chapter 17: Walls Come Down

It was another overcast morning that greeted the teens as they gathered at the arena. Inside, they discovered that Gobber had somehow found the time since they had last been there to set up some sort of maze within the confines of the arena, made up of wooden plank walls held together by metal fittings.

"The Hel is this?" Snotlout asked, before the portcullis slammed shut behind them, sealing off the only exit.

"Good mornin' everyane!" Gobber called from above them. Looking up, the teens found Gobber in the seating area, leaning over the wall that surrounded the edge and waving down to them.

"Gobber, whit's gaein' on!?" Merida asked as they all turned their attention to their teacher.

"Excellent question!" Gobber exclaimed, "Taeday is all about attack! Speakin' o' attack, did Ah mention Ah already let th' Deadly Nadder oot?"

"What!?" they all exclaimed at once before they heard the distinct roar of the Nadder as it leapt up onto one of the walls, roaring again as it spotted them.

"Everyone into the maze!" Astrid exclaimed, causing them all to rush towards the entrance. Near the entrance, they noticed a stack of shields had been set up. They each quickly grabbed one before entering the maze just as the Nadder reached them.

"Scatter!" Astrid shouted, causing each of the teens to run in a different direction into the maze, forcing the Nadder to choose one of them to chase after. Unfortunately for Merida, it chose her.

"Nadders are quick an' light on their feet," Gobber explained as Merida ran around a corner, the Nadder hopping up onto the wooden walls and skipping across the top of them in an effort to track her, "Yer job is tae be quicker an' lighter."

As Merida turned another corner, the Nadder suddenly hopped down in front of her, screeching at the princess. Merida slid to a stop in front of the dragon, her shield at the ready. The Nadder lowered its head as it glared at Merida. As it did, it opened its mouth and began clicking its tongue at her. Merida raised a confused eyebrow at the Nadder, slowly backing away as the dragon stalked towards her. As the Nadder continued to click its tongue at her, Merida noticed something odd about the roof of the dragon's mouth. There was a small mark, something that looked like a scar, one made by a small piercing weapon, such as a knife or an arrow.

"Oh bloody Hel," Merida swore, her eyes widening as she realized this wasn't the first time she had seen this Nadder, "It's ye."

Hissing as it seemed to realize Merida recognized it, the Nadder snapped its tail at her, sending half a dozen of its spines flying towards her. Seeing them coming, Merida quickly lifted up her shield, half of the spines thudding against the hard wood as the others sailed by her.

"Hah!" Merida laughed mockingly at the Nadder, "Ah was ready fer ye 'at time!"

Hissing at her, the Nadder opened her mouth, which began to glow red as it prepared to shoot a fireball at her.

"Oh," Merida whispered to herself, her eyes going wide, "Right."

Merida dove to the side as the ball of fire shot through the air, the heat rippling the air as it flew by and slammed into one of the maze walls, cracking and charring it. Merida quickly pushed herself to her feet as the Nadder charged at her, its jaws open wide.

"Oh, sod this!" Merida swore before grabbing the shield like a discus and threw it at the Nadder, hitting the dragon right on its nose. The

Nadder howled in pain as it stumbled to the side, slamming into the wall and sliding against it as it fell to the ground, its spines gouging the wood as it went. Merda quickly jumped to the side before running around the Nadder, racing around a corner as the dragon recovered. Hissing, the Nadder hopped back up onto the walls and resumed hunting the teenagers.

Running around another corner, Merida almost ran full speed into Ruff and Tuff.

"Whoa!" Ruff exclaimed, grabbing onto Merida's shoulders and stopping her before she knocked the blonde over, "Easy there!"

"Where's the Nadder?" Tuff asked, looking around wearily.

"Hot on ma tail, probably," Merida said, glancing over her shoulder as she unslung her bow from her shoulders, "It's got it oot fer me."

"Why would a dragon have it out for you?" Ruff asked as Tuff walked up towards the corner and peeked around it.

"Because durin' a dragon attack a while back, Ah shot it in th' mouth," Merida explained as she notched an arrow on the bowstring.

"You shot it in the mouth?" Ruff asked, clearly impressed, "Damn, you get more badass every time I talk to you."

As they talked, Fishlegs suddenly came running around another corner, the Nadder right on his heels. As he ran, the Nadder fired another bunch of spines, which he spun around to deflect with his shield, almost tripping over his feet as he did.

"Gobber!" Fishlegs called as he ran towards the others, "I'm really beginning to question your teaching methods!"

"Look fer its blindspot!" Gobber instructed as Fishlegs ducked around the corner Tuffnut had been looking around, leaving Merida and the twins directly in the dragon's path, "Every dragon has ane. Find it, hide in it, an' strike!"

Merida and the twins quickly lined up directly in front of the Nadder's nose as closely as they could, Tuffnut in front and Merida in back, all three hiding in the blindspot in the dragon's vision. As the dragon snorted at the air in confusion, it blew a blast of air in their faces, causing the girls to gag.

"Do you ever bathe?" Ruffnut choked as the three tried to stay in the Nadder's blindspot, following the dragon as it bobbed its head about, sniffing the air.

"Ye smell like month-old cabbage," Merida gripped.

"Look, if you two don't like it then you can get your own blindspots," Tuff groused before shoving back against his sister, pushing her into Merida.

"How about I give you a blindspot!" Ruff shouted as she grabbed Tuff and spun him around as she pulled her arm back to punch him. As she

did, the Nadder hissed in anger before opening its mouth to prepare to shoot a blast of fire.

"Doon!" Merida shouted before tackling the twins to the ground as the blast of fire shot over them.

"Move!" Merida shouted, hopping to her feet and doing her best to drag the twins with her, dropping the arrow she had notched in her bow as she did. As the teens got back to their feet, the Nadder roared at them and snapped at them with its teeth. Merida dodged out of the way as the twins stumbled to the side.

"Run!" Tuff yelled as he, Ruff and Merida turned and ran around the corner, the Nadder screeching at them as it gave chase.

"As ye can see, blindspot, yes. Deafspot? Nae sae much," Gobber said with a laugh as he watched the teens flee from the Nadder. Stopping at a point where he could see Gobber, Hiccup looked up at his teacher.

"Yeah, so uh, how would one sneak up on a Night Fury?" Hiccup questioned.

"Nae ane's ever met ane an' lived tae tell th' tale," Gobber replied, sighing in exasperation, "Now get in there!"

"I know, I know, but hypotheticallyâ€¦" Hiccup said as he began to walk away from Gobber.

"Hiccup!" he heard Astrid harshly whisper at him. Turning, he saw Astrid and Snotlout crouched by a corner, looking back at him.

"Get down!" Astrid whispered, motioning for Hiccup to crouch down and move over to them. Hiccup nodded in reply, crouching down and moving over to the other two, drawing Endeavor as he went. As he lined up behind Snotlout, he saw Fishlegs, Merida and the twins come around a corner towards them. Astrid signaled for them to stop, causing the other teens to slow to a stop and crouched at the corner across from them with Merida in front. Leaning forward, they saw the Nadder walked around the corner, quickly ducking back behind their corners as the dragon sniffed the air and scanned the area.

"Whit dae we dae?" Merida mouthed, looking Astrid dead in the eye. The question seemed to surprise Astrid, catching her off guard. Just the day before she had told Merida that she was in this to prove herself to the village. That she didn't care about helping the others. But yet here Merida was, asking her what they should do. She was ready to shrug off the question and figure things out on her own when she thought back to the day before some more. She thought of what Hiccup said about working together. About what Gobber had told them about teamwork. How Merida, of all people, had taken the lead on congratulating the others. Maybe Merida and the others were on to something. After all, charging in against the Nadder like this by herself was a stupid move, especially, when they had numbers and the element of surprise on their side. It'd be dumb not to take advantage of it, regardless of her feelings on the matter.

"We need to lure it into a trap," Astrid whispered, "If we can get it around the corner, we can all jump it before it knows what's happening."

"Ah can lure it," Merida said.

Astrid merely raised an eyebrow in reply.

"Trust me," Merida whispered.

Astrid sighed before nodding, looking away from Merida and putting her axe down, she caught the attention of Fishlegs and the twins. Motioning to herself, Snotlout and Hiccup, she pointed to the Nadder before she pantomimed someone walking and tripping. Then, pointing at them, she balled her hand into a fist before slamming it against her palm. She raised an eyebrow at the others, earning nods in reply. Turning her attention back to Merida, Astrid nodded towards her, to which Merida nodded back. Hopping to her feet, Merida ran around the corner, waving her arms and jumping up and down.

"Oi!" she shouted at the Nadder, which whipped its head around to look at her, "Over here! Come an' get me ye overgrown salamander!"

Spinning around, she shook her behind mockingly at the Nadder, before turning around again and sticking her tongue out at the dragon. The Nadder shrieked in anger before charging at Merida, its wings spread and its jaws open wide.

Merida spun on her heel and rushed back around the corner that she had been hiding behind, the Nadder chasing after her.

"Now!" Astrid exclaimed, as she, Snotlout, and Hiccup jumped into action. Snotlout swung his mace at one of the Nadder's legs, hitting it on the knee. At the same time, Astrid swung her axe, hitting the Nadder on the shin with the broadside of the axehead. As the Nadder cried out in pain and surprise, Hiccup threw himself at the base of the dragon's tail, slamming his shield against the beast, sending it tumbling forward onto its front.

"Get it!" Tuff shouted as he, his sister and Merida jumped onto the front of the dragon, trying to pin down its head and its wings while Snotlout, Astrid and Hiccup jumped on its lower body, Snotlout and Astrid grabbing onto its legs and Hiccup grabbing the tail.

"Hit it, Fishlegs!" Merida exclaimed, looking at Fishlegs, who tossed aside its shield and grabbed his hammer with both hands before rushing at the dragon with it raised. Seeing him coming, the Nadder began to thrash around, trying its best to throw the teenagers off. As it did, it lifted its tail up, Hiccup's weight proving insufficient to hold it down. Hiccup grasped the tail as the Nadder lifted up, taking care not to impale himself on one of the many spines sticking out.

Thrashing its tail to the side, the Nadder flung Hiccup off, causing the young man to go flying through the air before slamming into one of the wooden walls, causing it to shake and almost fall over as Hiccup slid back to the ground. Groaning in pain, Hiccup raised his head in time to see the Nadder lash its tail at Fishlegs, forcing the young man to roll out of the way as the deadly spines flew through the air towards him, imbedding in a wall further down the hallway.

As Fishlegs and Hiccup recovered, the Nadder began thrashing around, throwing off the teens as it stood up and roared. Rearing back, the dragon shot a ball of fire towards where Merida and Fishlegs were standing. Their eyes widened in surprise before diving out of the way as the fireball shot past and slammed into a wooden wall with enough force to knock it over, sending the structure falling to the ground in a cloud of dust and smoke.

"Now what!?" Snotlout exclaimed.

Looking at the collapsed wall, a thoughtful look crossed Hiccup's face before his eyes narrowed determinedly.

"New plan!" Hiccup exclaimed, pushing himself all the way back to his feet, "Fishlegs, Snotlout, Tuffnut! You guys are with me!"

"Hold up!" Snotlout said angrily, "I don't remember agreeing to follow you anywhere, Useless!"

"Hey, can you stow the ego for five minutes!?" Fishlegs shouted at the other boy as the Nadder swung its tail at Ruffnut, forcing the girl to roll out of the way, "I don't hear you coming up with any bright ideas!"

Snotlout grumbled angrily but said nothing else.

"Whit about us?" Merida questioned as she ducked out of the way as the Nadder tried to bite her head off.

"You, Astrid and Ruffnut need to lead it away!" Hiccup explained, before pointing in the direction away from them, "Just keep leading it until you hear me tell you differently!"

"That's your master plan!?" Astrid shouted angrily as the Nadder screeched angrily, "Run away!?"

"It's not so much a master plan as a "make-it-up-as-I-go-along" one!" Hiccup yelled back, "Now go!"

With that, Hiccup turned and began to run away from the action, Fishlegs following him. Snotlout and Tuffnut glanced at each other before Tuffnut shrugged and began to follow. Seeing his best friend go, Snotlout groaned in annoyance before following as well. Seeing them go, the Nadder roared and began to follow them, but stopped when an arrow flew from over its shoulder and glanced off of its cheek. Snarling, the Nadder spun around, finding Merida standing behind it with her bow pointed at the dragon, a cheeky grin on her face.

"Well, you got its attention," Ruffnut muttered, glancing between Merida and the Nadder as it slowly turned to face them, growling lowly, "Now what?"

"Now, we dae as Hiccup said," Merida replied hopping on her toes as she began to back away while the Nadder lowered its body and began to creep closer, "We run!"

With that, Merida spun around and took off running away from the Nadder, the action urging Astrid and Ruffnut to follow her as the dragon screeched and began to give chase.

As the girls lead the Nadder in one direction, Hiccup and the other guys began to circle around through the maze back towards them.

"So, what exactly are we doing?" Tuff questioned as he and the others raced behind Hiccup.

"I noticed that Gobber didn't set the walls up as best he could," Hiccup explained, struggling to keep his breath as he ran, "The foundations are wobbly."

"So?" Snotlout asked as they turned a corner, Fishlegs almost tripping and falling on his face.

"So, if we throw enough weight at one of them, it will fall over," Hiccup elaborated, "Probably pinning anything under it."

"Like the Nadder," Fishlegs surmised with a grin.

"Exactly," Hiccup replied with a nod, "The girls lead the dragon into position, we knock the wall onto it, the Nadder gets trapped, Gobber puts it back in its pen and we go home with all our limbs still attached."

"I've heard worse plans," Tuff commented as they turned another corner. As they did, they heard the screeching of the Nadder somewhere nearby followed by the flash of fire from behind one of the walls.

"Merida!" Hiccup shouted, coming to a stop with the other behind him.

"Hiccup!" he heard Merida call over the wall directly in front of them.

"Mer! Lead the Nadder in front of this wall!" Hiccup called as he ran up to the wall and began knocking on it.

"Alright!" Merida shouted, as she and the other girls lead the Nadder into position. As soon as the Nadder was in front of the wall, Astrid and Ruffnut tumbled around it, the three girls forming a triangle around the dragon. Astrid and Ruffnut quickly began banging on their shields, the sound causing the Nadder to shake its head as it tried to fight off the daze the sound caused it.

"Whatever you guys are going to do, you better do it soon!" Astrid exclaimed as the dragon began to turn towards her, growling angrily. Nodding to himself, Hiccup backed away from the wall, motioning for the other boys to line up with him.

As the boys prepared themselves, the Nadder lashed out at Astrid with its tail. Astrid managed to duck below the attack, but was unprepared as the Nadder flicked its tail back towards her, sending a salvo of spines flying at her. Two of the spines hit Astrid's shield which caught her off guard and knocked her defense to the side, which left her open as a third spine sliced her arm. Astrid cried out in pain as she grasped the wound as blood began to seep down her arm, dropping her weapon and shield in the process.

"Astird!" Ruffnut exclaimed in fear, trying to run over to her

friend, but was knocked to the side as the Nadder swept its tail at her, striking her in the stomach and lifting her off her feet before sending her rolling across the ground. Turning its attention back to Astrid, the Nadder lifted its leg up and pinned the girl to the ground as she tried to roll away, knocking the air out of the blonde's lungs. Leaning down, the Nadder roared right in Astrid's face, causing the girl to let out a primal cry of terror as she scrunched her eyes in fear.

"Oi!" Merida shouted, before an arrow dug in between the Nadder's scales just above the dragon's shoulder. Screeching in pain and anger, the Nadder turned to glare at Merida, who had already notched another arrow and pulled it back to her cheek, the princess's icy blue eyes locking with the dragon's bright yellow ones.

"Ferget about me?" Merida questioned, raising an eyebrow as the dragon snarled, stepping off Astrid and moving towards the princess, spreading its wings threateningly as it let out a full-bodied roar.

"Hiccup!" Merida shouted, taking a hesitant step away from the Nadder.

"Now!" Hiccup exclaimed before he and the other boys ran at the wall. Leaping forward, the four boys slammed their shoulders against the hard wood, throwing all their weight behind the maneuver. As they hit, there was a loud snap before the wall began to fall down, the boys falling with it. The wall slammed down on top of the Nadder, cutting it off mid scream as it smashed against the ground, kicking up a large cloud of dust.

Coughing, Merida waved the dust away from her face before observing the scene before her. A large section of the wall lay on the ground before her, pinning the Nadder to the ground, its head the only thing sticking out from underneath it. Looking past the dragon, she could see the four boys slowly pushing themselves up, each letting out groans of pain as they did. Past them, Merida could see Ruffnut pulling herself to her wobbly feet as she held her head with one of her hands. Hearing the distinctive noise of wood clacking against stone, Merida saw Gobber coming down the passageway towards them as fast as he could.

A sharp cry of pain quickly caught Merida's attention. Turning, she saw Astrid lying on the ground, her lower body pinned beneath the heavy wood. She let out another painful shout as she tried in vain to lift the section of wall off of herself.

"Get off!" Merida shouted, turning her attention to the boys and making a shooing motion at them. Hiccup looked at her in confusion, before Merida motioned towards Astrid. Looking at Astrid, Hiccup's eyes went wide as he scrambled to his feet.

"Oh gods!" he exclaimed as he tried to drag the others to their feet, "Get off the wall! Get off it now!"

It took a moment for the other three boys to realize what Hiccup was talking about before they saw Astrid pinned, but by that time Hiccup had already moved over towards her along with Ruffnut.

"Astrid, are you okay!?" Hiccup asked, grabbing the sides of his head

in a panic, looking over at Gobber who was struggling to get over to their side.

"Does it look like I'm okay!?" Astrid screamed at him, "Get it off!"

"I'll get you out, Astrid!" Snotlout announced, before grabbing the edge of the wall and attempting to lift it off of her, his face turning red as his muscles strained under the weight, moving the wall slightly, but not enough to free Astrid. After a second, he let out a large exhale as he released the wall, stumbling away from it as Astrid let out another cry of pain.

"I can't do it!" Snotlout exclaimed in despair, "It's too heavy!"

"Move!" Fishlegs shouted, shoving Snotlout to the side as he took his place, "Let me try."

Taking a deep breath, Fishlegs grabbed the edge of the wall before he began to lift it. Fishlegs' muscles pulled at one another as his veins throbbed beneath his skin, the wall lifting inch by inch off of Astrid's legs. Letting out a cry of exertion, Fishlegs managed to lift the wall just enough to free Astrid.

"Pull her oot!" Gobber shouted as he reached them, gesturing wildly at Astrid, "Pull her oot!"

Not needing to be told twice, Hiccup and Ruffnut reached down, each grabbing one of Astrid's arms before dragging her out from underneath the wall. As soon as Astrid was clear, Fishlegs let go off the wall, which hit the ground heavily, causing the Nadder to moan in pain again. As Hiccup and Ruffnut let go of her, Astrid let out a hiss of pain before grabbing her right leg, gritting her teeth as she pulled it against her.

"Astrid, are you okay?" Ruffnut asked with a worried tone, kneeling down next to her friend.

"My leg!" Astrid exclaimed, not even opening her eyes to look at Ruffnut, "It hurts!"

"Ye're gaein' tae be okay, Astrid," Gobber said, leaning down before scooping the girl up into arms, causing her to let out a small whimper of pain, "Ah'll get ye tae Gothen, she'll know whit tae dae. As fer th' rest o' ye, class dismissed."

As Gobber began to walk away, Hiccup watched him go with a worried expression. At least until he felt someone grab his shoulder and spin him around, coming face to face with Snotlout's angry glare.

"This is all your fault!" Snotlout exclaimed, pointing an accusing finger right in Hiccup's face, "I knew we shouldn't have listened to your stupid plan!"

"I had no idea that something like this was going to happen!" Hiccup yelled back, holding his hands up in front of himself as he took a step away from his cousin.

"You should know by now that your stupid ideas always mess up in the

end," Snotlout growled, taking another step closer to Hiccup. He tried to move closer still, but was stopped when someone put their hand on his chest and pushed him back. Turning to the side, he saw Ruffnut standing there with her arm extended, her eyes narrowed dangerously at him.

"It wasn't his fault, Snotlout, and you know it," Ruffnut said evenly, before motioning towards the pinned Nadder, "Also, did you forget about the part where his plan helped us actually take down a dragon?"

Snotlout snarled at Ruffnut and moved to say something, but stopped when he felt someone place a hand on his shoulder. Turning, he found Tuffnut standing next to him.

"Ease up, man," Tuffnut said, "It was an accident. There was no way any of us could have known this would happen. I mean, you went along with the plan, just like she did. It's nobody's fault."

Snotlout just looked at his best friend like he had grown a second head for a few moments before shaking his head angrily and pulling his shoulder from Tuffnut's grasp.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Snotlout growled angrily before he began to walk away, "Whatever. I'm out of here."

The five teenagers watched Snotlout as he went, before turning to each other as he turned out of sight.

"Thanks for that," Hiccup said to the twins, looking at them with trepidation.

"Don't worry about it," Tuffnut replied with a shrug, "What you said the other day about working together turned out to be true. Just harder for some of us to accept, I guess."

Hiccup blinked in surprise, his eyebrows rising at the maturity of the normally brash boy's words.

"What?" Tuff asked, raising an eyebrow of his own, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Well, I was just thinking this is most you and I have ever talked one on one," Hiccup explained, "Like ever."

Tuffnut merely shrugged in reply.

"So far it seems like dragon training has been all about weird things," Tuffnut stated, "What's one more addition to the pile?"

"Have to say, that was a pretty sweet idea," Ruffnut commented with a chuckle, "Good thing Gobber set up these walls, or we would have been sunk."

"We probably would have figured something out," Fishlegs stated with a shrug, "We seemed to pick up the whole teamwork thing pretty quickly."

"You got that right, big guy," Ruffnut replied, walking over and

patting Fishlegs on his bicep, causing the boy to blush, "How much can you lift anyway? That was pretty impressive, what you did with the wall."

"Uh, thanks," Fishlegs replied awkwardly as he scratched the back of his neck, "And I don't know, I haven't really looked into that."

"You might want to," Ruffnut commented, letting her fingers trail down Fishlegs arm as she let hers fall to the side, "Girls are always impressed by stuff like that."

Fishlegs coughed nervously into his hand as his face turned beat red as Ruffnut grinned, Tuffnut rolled his eyes and Merida and Hiccup shared a quick glance, raising their eyebrows at one another.

"Anyway, we should probably get going too," Tuffnut spoke up as turned to leaving, grabbing his sister's arm and dragging her along behind him, "See you guys later."

"Yeah. By the way, sick shots with that bow, Red," Ruffnut said, pulling her arm out of her brother's grasp and pointing a finger at Merida as the two of them left "Look forward to working with you again in the future."

"Um, thanks," Merida replied awkwardly, "I think?"

As they left, Merida turned to look at Fishlegs and Hiccup.

"Is she always like 'at?" Merida questioned, pointing in the direction the twins had gone.

"More or less," Fishlegs replied.

"Whit are we gaein' tae dae aboot th' Nadder?" Merida questioned, gesturing towards the dragon that still lay under the section of collapsed wall.

"I guess we'll have to leave it here until Gobber comes back to put it in its pen," Fishlegs said with a shrug.

"You think it will be okay?" Hiccup asked, a note of concern in his voice.

"Looks fine for now," Fishlegs commented, before motion towards the way the others had gone, "We should probably be heading out too."

"Yeah," Hiccup replied with a nod, before he and Fishlegs began to head in the indicated direction. Glancing back, he saw Merida looking down at where the Nadder was laying.

"You coming, Mer?" Hiccup asked.

"Aye," Merida replied, shaking her head as if she was coming out of a daze, "Ah'm right behind ye."

Hiccup nodded in reply before turning and walking along with Fishlegs. Merida began moving to follow before pausing to glance back

down at the Nadder, which was watching her with one of its yellow eyes.

"Well, guess Ah'll be seein' ye," Merida commented good naturedly, smirking at the Nadder before turning and walking away. As she walked, she heard a distinctive clicking noise from behind her. Glancing back, she saw that the Nadder had lifted its head up as best it could to look at her, clicking its tongue at her. For a moment, Merida merely stood there, looking at the dragon as it clicked its tongue at her for a third time. As it did, almost on instinct, Merida clicked her tongue back at the Nadder before quickly turning on her heel and walking away, knowing that the dragon was watching her every step of the way.

Later,

Astrid sighed as she lay on a bed within Gothi's simple hut which sat next to the much more impressive temple near the center of the village. It was a good enough size room, built to hold multiple people for when Gothi needed to practice her sometimes occupation as the village healer. Scattered around the room were various collections of herbs and flowers from around the island, as well as some jars containing things that Astrid felt she was better off not knowing about. Various fetishes were hung around the room and Astrid noticed a holy symbol carved into the section of the roof above her head.

Groaning due to the throbbing in her foot, Astrid glanced down at it. Her right foot sat elevated at the end of the bed, her right boot sitting at attention on the floor under it. Gothi had said that Astrid had hurt her ankle and the muscles in her leg when the wall had fallen on her. No permanent damage, luckily. Astrid would just have to give it time to heal. In the meantime, Gothi had wrapped Astrid's leg in a bandage soaked with a potion that Gothi said would ease the pain and bring down the swelling.

As Astrid observed her leg, she let out an annoyed grumbled before scratching at the bandage around her arm. For the cut she had received from the Nadder's spine, Gothi had applied a stinking pink paste to the wound, before wrapping it in a bandage as well. Much to Astrid's annoyance, she quickly discovered that, when dry, the paste itched like nothing she had ever experience. She quickly figured out that the bandage was probably more to keep Astrid from scratching the paste off then to protect her from any sort of infection.

As Astrid lay miserably on the bed, Gothi hobbled in, carry a Y-shaped stick that seemed sized for someone of Astrid's size.

"Here you go, child," Gothi said happily, holding the stick out for Astrid to take as the girl sat up in bed, "This will help you move around when you have to, but remember, not too much. The best way to insure your leg heals quickly is to stay off of it."

"Yes, Gothi," Astrid sighed as she took the crutch from the elder.

"And make sure you apply this to your cut every night until it is healed," Gothi instructed, handing Astrid a small jar of the pink paste, the girl having to fight to keep from scrunching her nose up in disgust.

"Yes Gothi," Astrid grumbled as she stood up and put the crutch under her armpit, leaning on it instead of her injured leg.

"Is something troubling you, child?" Gothi asked, raising a questioning eyebrow up at Astrid.

"No, nothing, it's justâ€¦" Astrid said before trailing off, avoiding eye contact with Gothi.

"Come now, child, you can talk to me," Gothi urged, smiling warmly at Astrid, who looked down at the older woman and sighed.

"It's justâ€¦I feel like I'm not proving myself like I should be," Astrid explained, "We've only had two sessions, and already I'm injured, when the others are fine. I'm supposed to be the best, but I keep getting shown up by Fishlegs and Hiccup and that little Highlanderâ€¦."

Astrid trailed off, opting to instead let out an angry grunt as she gripped the crutch so tightly her knuckles turned white. Gothi watched the display with a small smile on her face.

"Are you having problems with Princess Merida?" Gothi questioned.

"Of course I'm having problems with her!" Astrid shouted, "You know what happened to my father! Her people, the people her family rules, killed him!"

"Killed him in war, child," Gothi stated, "Your father went into battle knowing full well he could die."

"That doesn't matter!" Astrid snapped, feeling her anger rising, "Her people killed my father!"

"She is not her people," Gothi argued.

"He died fighting them!" Astrid spat, "That's all that matters!"

"Your father died with honor," Gothi said, urging Astrid to listen to reason.

"I don't care about his honor!" Astrid shouted, her eyes watery from barely suppressed tears, "I just care about him! I just want my father! But I can never have him back. Because they took him from me."

"Child. Sweet child," Gothi cooed, touching Astrid's arm and urging her to sit back down on the bed, "Dying is just part of life. All mortal lives must come to an end. Your father lived a good life and I have no doubt the gods justly rewarded him for it. He would want you to remember him. He would want you to mourn him. But thisâ€¦child, no parent would want this."

"Whatâ€¦what do you mean?" Astrid asked, wiping at the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks.

"This anger that you've kept locked up in you all these years, it's

not good, child. It's not good at all," Gothi explained, before reaching up and gently touching the bandage on Astrid's arm, "This anger is like a wound, and by keeping it fresh within your heart, you've allowed it to fester. I promise you, child, if you do not find a way to let go of your anger, to release that which has plagued you for so long, one way or another, it shall be the death of you."

Astrid fell silent as she looked into Gothi's imploring eyes, feeling the weight of the elder's words sink into her somewhere within the core of her being.

"The princess might be your best bet to release some of this anger," Gothi continued, "Has she, as herself, done anything to you that you cannot forgive?"

"Sheâ€|she hasn't done anything to me at all," Astrid said, her voice barely above a whisper, "She's saved my life twice now."

The two fell into silence, Gothi allowing Astrid to collect herself as she knew the young girl had more to say.

"But I have done things to her," Astrid continued after a moment, "Awful things."

"That," Gothi said, smiling warmly at Astrid, "is what forgiveness is for."

"What if I can't ask for it?" Astrid questioned, clearly conflicted, "And what if she won't give it?"

"All good things come with time, child" Gothi said reassuringly as she placed her hand on Astrid's, "All good things come with time."

A/N: Well, I have to say that this was a fun chapter to write! Originally, it was not going to all be focused on this one scene, but it just kind of grew in my head and got away from me. I hope you guys don't mind, because I think it really came out good! Also, over four hundred reviews on this story now! This is unbelievable! You guys are awesome, thanks for making this story so great to write! Criticism and feedback is always welcome, so please review! Later!

18. A Dance with a Dragon

Chapter 18: A Dance with a Dragon

The late afternoon sun hung over the small cove, the high rock walls casting long shadows across the pond at its center. The entire valley was still and quiet, seemingly empty from where the three teenagers stood, looking out at it from the crevice in the rocks they had made their way down to. Fishlegs stood in front, his girth and the shield he was carrying almost blocking the entirety of Hiccup and Merida's view as they huddled behind him.

"Do you see it, Fishlegs?" Hiccup asked, peeking over the taller boy's shoulder, a raw fish tucked under his arm.

"N-No," Fishlegs replied before gulping nervously.

"Well, we cannae stand here all afternoon," Merida stated before giving Fishlegs a small shove to urge him forward. Fishlegs gulped again before he slowly began inching towards the valley entrance. As he did, the crevice narrowed and the edges of his shield became jammed in the rocks, refusing to budge another inch forward. Fishlegs blinked in surprise and tried to pull the shield back, but found that the shield was stuck in the rocks. Slowly, he turned around and looked sheepishly at his friends.

"Really?" Hiccup asked, raising an eyebrow at Fishlegs.

"Oh, don't give me that," Fishlegs shot back, "You would have done the same thing."

Merida merely sighed and rolled her eyes before ducking past Fishlegs and stooping under his shield, entering the cove. Fishlegs and Hiccup looked at her for a few moments before she placed her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow at them. Smirking, Hiccup quickly ducked under the shield and stepped over next to Merida. The two looked at Fishlegs expectantly, watching as the large boy tried to duck under the shield as well, only to find that he couldn't fit. Sighing as he stood back up, Fishlegs grabbed the top of the shield and attempted to climb over it instead. As Fishlegs lifted his feet off the ground and put all of his weight on the shield, there came a cracking noise, causing him to freeze before the shield suddenly broke loose from the wall, sending Fishlegs falling flat on his face.

"Are you alright?" Hiccup whispered as he and Merida rushed over to Fishlegs' side.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Fishlegs replied, waving the two off as he stood up and brushed himself off before stooping down and picking up his shield, "We have bigger things to worry about, remember?"

Hiccup and Merida both nodded solemnly, before turning their attention to the cove around them. Slowly, the trio made their way out into the open, sticking close together and rapidly scanning the surrounding area. Suddenly, Merida perked up as if she heard something and spun around, gasping as she did. The other two quickly followed suit, their eyes widening in surprise and fear as they saw the Night Fury perched on a large rock, watching them like a predator ready to pounce on them.

Slowly, the Night Fury crawled down from its perch, its black-on-green eyes never looking away from the teens. As it reached the ground, the Night Fury sniffed at the air before growling at the trio. Sensing what the Night Fury wanted, Hiccup cautiously took a step forward as he held the fish out in front of him. Slowly, the Night Fury began to approach Hiccup, its mouth opening to bite the fish. Before it did, the Night Fury's eyes flashed up to the sword strapped to Hiccup's back, letting out an angry growl as it backed away again, its eyes darting to Merida and Fishlegs as well.

"Our weapons," Hiccup whispered, unstrapping his sword and taking it into his hands, "It doesn't like our weapons."

"Well, Ah daenae exactly like th' idea o' bein' in close proximity o' a Night Fury without ma weapon," Merida whispered back, touching the bow slung around her shoulders but not taking it into her hands.

"I don't think we really have much of a choice," Fishlegs stated wearily, watching the Night Fury glare at him as he took his warhammer slowly out of his belt before tossing it away, Hiccup following suit, their weapons landing with a thud on the ground a few feet away. Merida quickly glanced between the weapons on the ground and the Night Fury, which had turned its attention towards her and snarled, hesitating as she tried to decide what to do.

"Merida," Hiccup pleaded, glancing over at her.

"All right, all right, fine," Merida replied reluctantly, unslinging her bow and quiver, before tossing them to the side with the other weapons. As soon as the Night Fury saw that the weapons were out of reach, its attitude completely changed. It quickly sat back on its legs, its once narrowed eyes opening wide as it tilted its head curiously at them, one of its ears twitching as it watched them. Merida had to fight the urge to coo at the sudden adorableness of the dragon before her.

Hiccup slowly held the fish out again, prompting the Night Fury to approach him a second time. As it leaned forward to take the fish, it opened its gummy mouth which was completely devoid of teeth.

"Huh, toothless," Hiccup mused, a confused expression on his face, "I could have sworn you had-"

Before he could say anything more, a set of pointed teeth extended from the Night Fury's gums as the dragon bit into the fish and pulled it from Hiccup's grasp. The three teens gasped in surprise as the Night Fury lifted its head up and swallowed the fish mostly whole, licking its lips in satisfaction.

"No teeth," Hiccup finished, shock written on his face.

Eyeing the teens curiously, the Night Fury began to approach them, causing them to back away in fear.

"Uh...No, no," Hiccup said nervously as he tripped over his own feet and crawled backwards until his back was against a rock, Merida and Fishlegs fretfully flanking it, Merida's hand held out towards Hiccup as she tried to figure out what to do, "I...uh...don't have anymore."

The Night Fury continued to approach him until its face was mere inches from Hiccup's own. Then, its eyes suddenly rolled back in its head as it made gagging noises with its throat. A second later, the Night Fury spat up the fish it had just eaten into Hiccup's lap, the saliva and digestive fluids seeping into his pants.

"At's disgustin'," Merida muttered, a look of revulsion on her face, mirrored by Hiccup and Fishlegs. As the teens looked at its offering in repulsion, the Night Fury sat back on its hind legs, watching Hiccup expectantly. For a few moments, the teens merely stared at the Night Fury in confusion, the dragon looking silently back at them as Hiccup held the half-eaten fish in his hands. Then, when Hiccup failed to do anything, the Night Fury quickly glanced down at the fish in the boy's hands before looking back at him. The small action instantly revealed the Night Fury's intention, causing Hiccup to look down at the fish in surprise before sighing in

defeat.

Reluctantly, Hiccup lifted the raw fish, still covered in juices from the dragon's belly, up to his mouth before taking a bite out of it. Hiccup could have sworn he felt his tongue shrivel up and die as his mouth filled with the fish meat, Merida's lip curling in horror and disgust behind him while Fishlegs placed his hand over his hand in an effort to keep from spewing bile. Forcing a smile on his stuffed face, Hiccup held the fish up for the Night Fury to see. The Night Fury quickly glanced down at the fish before swallowing. Hiccup looked incredulously at the Dragon before sighing through his nose. Leaning his head back, he swallowed, fighting the urge to throw it back up. Finally forcing the fish meat down his throat, Hiccup shuddered in disgust.

Looking up, he saw the Night Fury lick its lips, leading Hiccup to smile awkwardly at the dragon. Seeing the smile, the Night Fury narrowed in confusion, before it tried to mimic the expression. As the three watched, the dragon slowly pulled its entire mouth into the facsimile of a smile, its retracted teeth completely showing its red gums.

Slowly standing up, Hiccup reached out with his hand, attempting to touch the Night Fury. The dragon looked at Hiccup in confusion before it snarled, baring its teeth at the young man and spinning away, leaping into the air and clumsily gliding to the other side of the cove.

After the Night Fury half landed, half crashed to the ground, the dragon wandered a short distance before scorching the ground with a small stream of fire. As the grass burnt and the ground smoldered, the Night Fury curled up into a ball and lay down.

"Now what?" Fishlegs questioned, looking at where the Night Fury lay along with the others.

"Come on," Hiccup said, signaling the others to follow him as they made their way around the lake. Cautiously, the three teens approached the dragon, which was preoccupied watching a bird flit through the air. Slowly, Hiccup sat on the ground a few feet away from the Night Fury, Merida and Fishlegs following suit. After a moment, the Night Fury lifted its head up and turned to look at the teens. Hiccup smiled and waved at the Night Fury, which grunted before turning away again, laying its head on the ground and wrapping its tail around its body, hiding its face from view.

Seeing his chance, Hiccup scooted over towards the Night Fury and reached out to touch its tail. Just as he was about to touch one of the dragon's scales, the Night Fury suddenly snapped its tail away and glared at Hiccup, causing the young man to hop back, knocking into Merida and Fishlegs. The Night Fury rolled its eyes before it got up and wandered away.

As the teens recollected themselves, the dragon wandered over to a large, exposed root and wrapped its tail around it, hanging from it like a bat and wrapping itself with its wings. The Night Fury closed its eyes, apparently trying to drift off to sleep. As the same time, the three teens sat upon the lake shore, alternating between watching the Night Fury and chatting amongst themselves.

"Ye sure this is a good idea, Hic?" Merida asked, sharing a seat on a rock with Hiccup as Fishlegs sat on the ground a few feet away.

"Well, it seemed to like this fish. Even wanted to share it with me," Hiccup replied, shivering at the memory as he began to sketch a picture of the Night Fury in the mud with a stick, "Plus it hasn't tried to kill us yet. I think those are all pretty good signs."

"Doesn't exactly seem to like you though," Fishlegs commented as he watched Hiccup draw.

As they watched Hiccup sketch in the mud, the Night Fury suddenly snuck up behind them, grumbling in curiosity. While Fishlegs froze in fear, Hiccup moved to turn around and look at the dragon, but stopped when Merida reached out and grabbed his arm, forcing him to stay facing forward. Nodding at the ground, Merida urged Hiccup to continue drawing which he did while taking nervous glances at the dragon that loomed behind him. The Night Fury seemed to be mesmerized by Hiccup's actions, watching closely as Hiccup's sketch became more and more detailed.

Without warning, the Night Fury suddenly spun away and wandered off. Letting out sighs of relief, the teens turned to look in the direction the Night Fury had gone in. As they watched, the Night Fury bit onto the branch of a nearby tree before snapping it off. The teens watched in surprise as the dragon dragged the branch back over to them, leaving a deep furrow in the muddy ground as it went. As they watched, the Night Fury began to circle around them, dragging the stick with it. Each and every movement the Night Fury made seemed purposeful, as if it was clumsily mimicking Hiccup sketching in the mud. After a few moments, the three teens stood up and looked around, seeing the Night Fury had drawn a large, squiggling design in the ground around them.

"What is this?" Fishlegs asked as he looked around at the design with the others.

As Hiccup walked around, observing the lines, he stepped on one by accident, causing the Night Fury to snarl at him. Hiccup quickly pulled his foot away, in turn causing the Night Fury to revert back to its calmer demeanor. Raising an eyebrow, Merida reached her foot out and touched one of the lines, causing the dragon to snarl at her as well. Fishlegs repeated the action with similar results.

"He doesnae want us tae touch th' lines," Merida observed.

"Yeah, but what does that mean?" Fishlegs questioned.

"It's tae see if he can trust us," Merida explained, "If we can move without touchin' th' lines, it will prove tae it that I can trust us. 'At it can trust Hiccup."

"Me?" Hiccup questioned, turning to look at her in surprise.

"It shared th' fish with ye, nae me or Fishlegs" Merida explained, "Ah know animals an' Ag think 'at 'at means it trusts ye more. This is yer chance tae prove it."

Hiccup looked down at the lines then back at Merida, who smiled encouragingly at him.

"Ye can dae this, Hiccup," Merida urged him earnestly, "Ah believe in ye."

"Yeah, you got this," Fishlegs agreed motioning towards the Night Fury as it watched them patiently, "It seems to like you."

Hiccup smirked at his friend before turning to Merida and nodding to her, earning a smile and a nod back. Taking a deep, calming breath, Hiccup reached his foot out and stepped onto a space between the lines, the Night Fury watching closely, but not reacting otherwise. Smiling, Hiccup lifted his foot up and began a slow, cautious dance as he navigated his way through the maze of lines and squiggles. His eyes glued to his feet, Hiccup was completely focused on his footwork, every movement carefully calculated and cautiously applied. It was only when Merida let out a small gasp that he became aware of his surroundings again, quickly realizing that the Night Fury was now less than a foot behind him.

As the dragon snorted and grumbled at him, Hiccup cautiously turned around, looking up to meet the Night Fury's gaze as it loomed over him. Taking a cautious breath, Hiccup slowly reached out to touch the Night Fury, only for it to flinch away and growl at him. Pulling his hand back, Hiccup took a moment to think before lowering his head and shutting his eyes, holding his hand out in front of himself but making no effort to touch the Night Fury. The Night Fury's eyes widened in surprise as it glanced between Hiccup and his outstretched hand. Merida and Fishlegs looked on in anxious fascination, Merida covering her mouth with her hands as Fishlegs' fingers nervously played with one another. Looking down at Hiccup's hand, the Night Fury hesitantly leaned towards it before closing its eyes and touching Hiccup's hand with its nose.

As he felt the warm, black scales of the Night Fury touch the palm of his hand, Hiccup's knees went weak and he let out a sharp exhale of surprise and excitement. Cautiously, he opened his eyes and turned to look at the Night Fury as it opened its own eyes and pulled away, snorting before wandering away. As Hiccup watched the Night Fury walk away, a thoughtful look crossed his face before looking down at his hand. His thinking was interrupted as Merida let out an excited giggle that mixed with Fishlegs astonished shout.

"Ye did it!" Merida cried as she ran over and flung herself at Hiccup, nearly knocking the boy down as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a hug that he quickly returned with a surprised laugh, "Ah knew ye cud dae it!"

Pulling away, she smiled warmly at Hiccup, who grinned back at her, his hands on her waist as he looked into her eyes.

"Couldn't have done it without you, Mer," Hiccup stated gently, causing her cheeks to go red as she looked away from him, her smile growing. Before she could say anything in reply, Fishlegs ran over to them and scooped them up into a bear hug, eliciting surprised laughs from them as he spun excitedly in a circle.

"You did it!" Fishlegs exclaimed happily, "You did it! You must be the first Viking to ever make friends with a dragon!"

Anything more that Fishlegs was planning on saying was quickly interrupted by the sound of polite clapping from somewhere above them. Freezing, Fishlegs quickly dropped Hiccup and Merida before the three of them spun to look in the direction the sound had come from. Looking up, they found Hilde standing on a ledge on the cliff face above them, clapping as she smiled down at them.

"Vell done, Reiter," Hilde congratulated as she stopped clapping, her pet crow shifting on her shoulder, "Vell done. As for vhat Leser said, you're not zee first to befriend a dragon, but it has been quite some time since someone has."

"You know," Hiccup said, pointing up at Hilde, "I'm starting to get the impression that you're following us."

"Oh, don't be silly, Reiter," Hilde replied, waving her hand dismissively at him, "I'm just out gazing some sings I need like efery day. I just happen to be here when you vere."

Hiccup and Fishlegs shared a look that spoke volumes. Merida however, looked at the old woman with curiosity as she watched Hilde pick up a basket she had set on the ground and begin gathering what looked like small, black rocks off the ground and cliffside.

"Whit are ye gatherin', Hilde?" Merida questioned.

"Oh, just a type of rock I like to use for zis and zat," Hilde explained as she picked up some more, "Vhen I grind it up, it adds a nice little zest to my tea."

Merida raised an eyebrow in reply but said nothing else. As Hilde began to collect more rocks, the pile in her basket became slightly uneven. As she placed one on the top of the pile, it rolled off before falling out of the basket and tumbling over the side of the ledge. Merida watched it fall, noticing a fine cloud of black dust falling behind it. As the stone neared the bottom of the cliff, it hit an out cropping of rock, causing a spark as the two hard surfaces made contact with one another. In a split second, the spark reached the cloud of black dust and the whole thing ignited. As Merida's eyes widened in surprise, the whole cloud burst into a fire, engulfing the rock. As the rock hit the ground, it impacted with a loud bang as a fireball exploded out from it, covering the surrounding few feet in fire. The explosion caused the three teens to jump back in alarm as the Night Fury snapped its head up and looked on in surprise.

The teens watched as the fire quickly died down, leaving a cloud of pitch black smoke in its wake that slowly floated up into the air. As the smoke cleared, they could see that the black rock had completely broken apart, leaving only small chunks and pebbles behind. The ground within the radius had been completely scorched and the surrounding grass had been burnt to a crisp. A small stream of smoke rose from the center of the explosion, and Merida noticed the ground was cracked a foot around the epicenter.

"What the Hel was that!?" Hiccup exclaimed, looking from the smoking remains of the explosion to where Hilde stood on the ledge above, looking down at the scene.

"Oh my, I'm sorry dearies," Hilde said, putting a hand over her mouth

in surprise, "I guess zat one got away from me."

"Ye guess?" Merida asked incredulously, "Hilde, whit are those thin's!?"

"Zey go by many names amongst many people but zee most common name you'll find for zem is black rocks, or black powder ven zey're ground up. As you can see, zey can be feryâ€folatile vhen mixed vith fire."

"Yeah, no kidding," Fishlegs replied, scratching the back of his head as he let out a long breath.

Cautiously, Hiccup approached the damaged ground, kneeling down to examine it closer. He slowly reached out to touch the charred ground, pulling his hand back briefly as he found the ground still hot to the touch. Running his finger along the outer edge of the explosion sight, he found that it was covered with a fine black powder different from the soot he was expecting.

"What exactly do you use this stuff for again?" Hiccup asked as he stood up and looked back at Hilde, rubbing his blackened fingers together.

"Zis and zat," Hilde replied with a shrug, "Nozing you need to concern yourself vith, child. It seems to me like you made a new friend today."

Turning, Hiccup looked at the Night Fury, who was sitting by the bank of the lake, watching them.

"I certainly hope so," Hiccup replied, smirking as he turned back to look at Hilde.

"Oh, I can tell," Hilde stated, nodding sagely, "He definitely trusts you now."

"He?" Merida asked, raising an eyebrow, "How dae ye know it's a he?"

Turning, she looked at the Night Fury before looking back at Hilde.

"Looks like a she tae me," Merida commented with a shrug.

"Trust me, Jaeger," Hilde replied with a good natured chuckle, "Zat Night Fury is a male."

Merida glanced at Hiccup, who merely shrugged in reply.

"Vhat are you going to call him?" Hilde asked.

"Call it?" Fishlegs asked, "What, you mean give it a name?"

"Of course," Hilde replied like it was the most obvious thing in the world, "You can't just keep referring to him as it, or zee dragon, or zee Night Fury."

"Ah guess she's right," Merida replied with a chuckle before looking at Hiccup, "Whit shud we call him? Seems anly fair ye shud

decide."

A thoughtful look fell over Hiccup's features. Stoking his chin, he turned to look at the Night Fury, which was still watching them some distance away. As their eyes met, the corners of the Night Fury's mouth began to twitch. As Hiccup watched, the Night Fury gave him the facsimile of a smile it had earlier, its retracted teeth showing off its red gums. As it did, an idea came to Hiccup.

"How aboutâ€¦Toothless," Hiccup suggested.

"Toothless?" Merida questioned as she and Fishlegs turned to follow Hiccup's gaze. Noticing all of their attention on it, the Night Fury quickly dropped its smile and looked away in seeming disinterest. Merida chuckled at the sight.

"Toothless," she repeated with a nod, "Ah like it."

"Yeah, that totally works," Fishlegs said in agreement.

"Alright," Hiccup stated firmly, a smile growing on his face as he turned to look back at the Night Fury, "Toothless it is."

A/N: Bit of a shorter chapter this time around, but I felt that this was a good stopping point for the chapter. I hope you guys liked it! As always feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

19. Talking and Tinkering

**Chapter 19: Talking and Tinkering **

Night had fallen over the village, casting the houses and shops in a dark twilight as the moon and stars shined overhead. Sitting on one of the freshly constructed watchtowers, huddled around a fire that had been built on the observation platform, the teens listened to Gobber as they roasted hunks of chicken meat over the flames.

"An' with ane twist, he took ma hand an' swallowed it whole!" Gobber exclaimed, holding his prosthetic hand up as evidence, an entire roasted chicken stuck to the end of it, "An' Ah saw th' look on his face. Ah was delicious. He must hae passed th' word because it wasnae a month afore another ane took ma leg."

The group of teens whispered amongst themselves in wonder as Gobber smiled in satisfaction. His face fell slightly as he heard Merida giggling to herself.

"Somethin' funny, princess?" Gobber questioned, raising an eyebrow at the girl sitting to Hiccup's left, the boy in question sitting on Gobber's left.

"Nae, sorry," Merida apologized, smiling at the blacksmith, "Yer story was great, Gobber it jistâ€¦reminds me o' ma da."

"Why's that?" Tuffnut questioned, leaning forward so he could get a better look at Merida from across the fire.

"Da tells stories like 'at all th' time, especially durin' dinner,"

Merida explained, smiling at the memory as she looked thoughtfully into the fire, "His favorite ane has always been aboot how he lost his leg fightin' Mor'du."

"I had heard your dad fought Mor'du before," Ruffnut stated, pointing her finger at Merida, "I heard he's got some kind of vendetta against him."

"Losin' a limb isnae exactly somethin' ye jist get over," Gobber commented knowingly.

"Ah swear Ah've heard 'at story sae many times 'at Ah cud recite it by heart," Merida said with smile.

"Why don't you?" Hiccup suggested, smirking at her.

"Huh?" Merida questioned, turning to look at Hiccup in confusion.

"Why don't you tell the story?" Hiccup clarified, "I'm sure the others would like to hear it."

Merida scanned the surrounding teens, looking to see if Hiccup was correct. Fishlegs was sitting on the edge of his seat in anticipation while the twins leaned forward so they could hear. Glancing over at Astrid, who sat on a stool provided by Gobber, her injured leg outstretched in front of her with her crutch on the ground next to her, she saw the blonde girl watching her with apparent interest. Even Snotlout was paying attention to her, though he was doing his best to seem like he wasn't. Gobber seemed interested as well, nodding encouragingly at her. Merida smiled as she turned back to Hiccup.

"Alright then," Merida said with a nod before turning back to the fire, "It all started on ma birthday, when Ah was jist a wee lass."

The other teens and even Gobber listened with rapt attention as Merida related her peoples' battles with the Vandal and their monstrous leader. Eventually, she got to her father's final confrontation with Mor'du.

"Ma father had ne'er seen a beast such as him," Merida whispered, leaning forward, unconsciously causing Fishlegs, Snotlout, Gobber and the twins to lean forward as well, "He wore th' fur o' a great black bear, its hide strew with th' weapons o' a dozen fallen warriors. His flesh was scarred from countless battles an' his face was marred with ane dead eye."

"What happened?" Ruffnut asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

"It was th' most intense fight ma da's ever experienced," Merida explained as she got to her feet and began pantomiming the sword fight, "Steel clashed with obsidian fer whit seemed like hours as neither gave th' other an inch. Eventually, th' fatigue got tae ma father an' with ane swing o' his mighty sword, Mor'du slashed ma father's leg clean off!"

The teenagers and Gobber gasped in surprise, causing Hiccup to smirk.

"What happened then?" Tuffnut questioned.

"Luckily fer ma da, th' lords an' some of their men showed up an' Mor'du decided tae make his retreat," Merida explained as she sat back down, "'At was th' last time any o' us saw him until th' day Ah arrived here."

"Wow," Fishlegs whispered, leaning back as he digested the story, "That was pretty intense."

"Yeah," Tuffnut agreed, "I think Mor'du has only shown his face once or twice around here, and those were only during quick raids. I can't imagine what it'd be like for him to full on invade."

"Let's hope ye ne'er hae tae," Merida stated, a slightly haunted look on her face as she remembered bits from that time in her life.

"Well, Ah think 'at's enough stories fer tonight," Gobber stated as he stood up and stretched, yawning loudly, "Ye'll all need yer rest for tomorrow, as we're movin' on tae some o' th' more advanced dragons."

Merida, Hiccup and Fishlegs shared a nervous expression while Snotlout and the twins looked excited.

"I think we should cut off the feet and claws of whatever dragon we fight to avenge Gobber's hand and foot," Tuffnut suggested, earning a nod from his sister.

"Forget th' feet," Gobber interrupted, shaking his hand dismissively at the teens, "It's th' wings an' tails ye want. Without them, a dragon cannae fly an' a downed dragon is a dead dragon."

As the other teens chuckled in appreciation, Merida and Fishlegs looked over at Hiccup, who had a distant, glassy-eyed look on his face that they had both had seen before, his finger raised as if he was counting something. All of a sudden, Hiccup snapped out of his daze and hopped to his feet, signaling the others to follow him as he moved to descend from the tower.

"Well, I agree with Gobber," Hiccup said before faking a loud yawn, "I think it's time to head off to bed."

"Aye," Merida agreed, standing up and stretching, "We'll see ye lot tomorrow."

"Have a good night everyone," Fishlegs stated as he stood up and waved to the group, earning waves from Gobber and the twins and a simple nod from Snotlout. Astrid, however, only watched him go with a thoughtful look on her face before she grabbed her crutch and began to hobble after them without a word to the others.

"So what's up?" Fishlegs asked in a whisper as the three made their way down the ramp that wrapped around the tower, "Because I get the feeling that you aren't as tired as you're letting on."

"I got an idea," Hiccup replied with a low voice, "An idea on how to make Toothless fly again."

"'At's amazin', Hiccup!" Merida said excitedly, "How dae ye plan on daein' 'at?"

"It'll be easier to show you," Hiccup answered, "Come on, we have to get to the smithy."

As the three began to make their way back into the village towards the smithy, they didn't notice Astrid hobbling along behind them.

"Fishlegs!" she called after them, causing all of them to stop and spin around, "Fishlegs, wait up!"

Merida and Hiccup looked at Fishlegs, who merely shrugged back at them.

"You guys go ahead," Fishlegs said, waving them off, "I'll catch up."

Nodding, both Hiccup and Merida turned and departed, sparing Fishlegs a worried glance before continuing on as Astrid caught up.

"Uh, hey Astrid," Fishlegs greeted the girl, his eyes narrowing as he noticed she was winded, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Astrid replied dismissively as she caught her breath, "Just a littleâ€|tougher with the crutch is all."

"How's the leg doing?" Fishlegs questioned, before motioning towards a large rock sitting nearby, "Do you need to sit down?"

"It's doing better. Gothi healed it up pretty well," Astrid replied, looking down at her feet, "And yeah, I wouldn't mind sitting down."

Fishlegs walked slowly over to the rock, keeping pace with Astrid's reduced speed. Astrid sighed as she sat on the rock, happily putting her crutch to the side while Fishlegs sat down next to her.

"So," Fishlegs began awkwardly, "What was it that you wanted to talk about?"

"Well, you and I haven't really talked in a while," Astrid explained.

"Iâ€|I don't think we ever really talked at all," Fishlegs replied in confusion.

"Sure we did," Astrid insisted, "We use to hang out all the time."

"No, you hung out with Snotlout and the twins," Fishlegs argued, "I was always just kind of there. I think I talked to Ruffnut more than I talked to you."

"Well," Astrid said hesitantly, "Sorry about that then."

"It's no big deal," Fishlegs stated with a shrug, "I just kind of figured you didn't really like me."

"I never disliked you, Fishlegs," Astrid insisted, turning to look at the other boy in the eye, "Honestly, I think I preferred your company to Snotlout's or Tuffnut's."

"Really?" Fishlegs asked with a snort, "Why's that?"

"Well, you didn't hit on me every other second," Astrid explained, looking down at her feet, "So, that's a plus."

"Well, it's not like I ever had a chance with someone like you," Fishlegs stated, smirking and rolling his eyes.

"You were a lot better conversation," Astrid said, smirking at the other boy and ignoring the self-deprecating humor, "Weren't always talking about how big your muscles are or how many dragons you were going to kill after dragon training."

"When you spoke," she continued, looking back at Fishlegs who was looking at her in surprise, "You actually had something to say. It wasâ€¦refreshing, and I kind of miss that."

"Wowâ€¦thanks," Fishlegs replied, his cheeks turning red as he awkwardly scratched the back of his head.

"Just telling the truth," Astrid replied with a shrug of her shoulders, looking back at her feet, "Why did you start hanging out with Hiccup again?"

"Well, if you remember, me and him used to be really close," Fishlegs explained, "He was my best friend. He is my best friend. And I missed him."

"Why'd you stop hanging out with him in the first place?" Astrid questioned, turning to face Fishlegs again.

"My dad hates him," Fishlegs said with a sigh, "Thinks he's the biggest burden the village has and that he's been a bad influence on me. He kind of forced me to start hanging out with Snotlout and Tuffnut."

"Only kind of?" Astrid questioned, picking up on the hesitance in Fishleg's voice.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't hate the abuse I got by being lumped in with Hiccup. Being seen as a failure like him," Fishlegs explained, a remorseful look on his face, "I just wanted people to like me. To be proud of me. So when my dad told me to stop hanging out with Hiccup, I didn't exactly put up a fight."

Fishlegs paused as he looked down at his hands clasped in front of him.

"It's something I've regretted ever since," Fishlegs finished.

"Was he mad when you went back to him?" Astrid questioned.

"Oh yeah," Fishlegs replied with a snort, "This was right after he beat up Snotlout and Tuffnut. I was worried he was going to do the same to me."

"Why didn't he?" Astrid asked.

"Well, I like to think I wouldn't have just rolled over and taken it if he had, but that's beside the point," Fishlegs answered with a shrug, "I just managed to convince him that I was sorry. That I wanted to be his friend again."

"And he believed it?" Astrid questioned, a surprised look on her face.

"Well, he took a little convincing but yeah," Fishlegs replied, "I mean, Hiccup's a pretty trusting guy, despite all of the stuff that he's had to deal with. Even then, I still had to earn his trust back."

"I see," Astrid stated simply, her eyes falling back towards her feet. There was a lull in the conversation before a pensive look crossed Fishlegs' face.

"Astrid, what is all this about?" Fishlegs inquired, turning to face her, "Why do you want to know about this?"

"I've made some mistakes too, Fishlegs," Astrid said with a sigh, "I've done things that I'm starting to regret and I need to know how to fix things."

"You're talking about you and Merida, aren't you?" Fishlegs surmised.

"I haven't been the best person to a lot of people," Astrid elaborated, "But yeah, this has to do with me and the princess."

"Well, I think that's your first problem right there," Fishlegs stated.

"What is?" Astrid asked in confusion.

"Calling her that," Fishlegs explained, "I don't think you've ever called her by her real name. She has one you know."

"I know!" Astrid snapped, turning to glare at Fishlegs, growing angry with the condescending tone Fishlegs was using on her.

"Well, I'm sure she'd appreciate you using it when talking to her," Fishlegs stated, seemingly unphased by Astrid's anger. Astrid sighed before turning away again.

"I was asking for your advice," Astrid grumbled, "Not for you to lecture me."

"Sorry," Fishlegs replied, holding up his hands in an effort to placate her, "I'm just trying to help."

This seemed to satisfy Astrid, who visibly calmed.

"Still, I'm not sure what other advice I can give you other than tell her you're sorry," Fishlegs continued, "Merida can be pretty headstrong from what I've seen and I can't guarantee she'll accept an

apology right away, and even if she does, I'm guessing it won't be without a good amount of yelling."

"Kind of what I'm expecting," Astrid said with a sigh.

"But that's not to say that it's impossible for her to forgive you," Fishlegs explained, "After all, she used to hate Hiccup, and now look at them."

"I have to admit, they're pretty good together," Astrid agreed with a small smirk, "Not something I was expecting."

"Hiccup's been surprising a lot of people recently," Fishlegs stated, turning to look at Astrid with a smile, "I think it's been because of Merida's influence. They're good for each other. Possibly even more than they realize."

"You seem like you're really rooting for them," Astrid said with a smirk, raising an eyebrow at Fishlegs.

"They're kind of adorable, Fishlegs explained with a laugh, "Even if they don't realize it."

Astrid laughed as well, pushing a stray hair behind her ear as she smiled at Fishlegs. Sighing, she turned and picked up her crutch.

"Well, thanks for the talk, Fishlegs," Astrid stated with a smile, "This has beenâ€|enlightening."

"No problem," Fishlegs replied with a shrug.

"Can you do me a favor?" Astrid questioned.

"Yeah, sure," Fishlegs replied, giving Astrid a questioning look, "What is it?"

"Can you not mention any of this to the prinâ€|to Merida?" Astrid asked uncertainly, "I'd rather her not know about this."

"Sure," Fishlegs agreed, nodding his head, "I can do that."

"Thanks," Astrid said, struggling to push herself to her feet.

"Here," Fishlegs said, pushing himself to his feet before offering his hand to Astrid, "Let me help you."

Astrid hesitated for a moment, looking at Fishleg's offered hand as she tried to figure out what to do. Her pride screamed at her to not take the offered help. She seemed weak enough already with her injuries, she didn't need to go accepting help for things she was perfectly capable of doing herself. But at the same time, Fishlegs was one, if not the, nicest guys she knew and looked like he genuinely wanted to help her. It was just him here. He wouldn't judge her, right?

"Sure," Astrid whispered as she reached out and strongly grasped Fishlegs' hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. As he did,

Fishlegs accidentally pulled to hard, forcing Astrid to reach out and catch herself on his chest. Fishleg's face glowed bright red as Astrid slowly pushed herself upright.

"Sorry," Fishlegs whispered, looking away in embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it," Astrid replied with a smirk.

Balancing on one leg, she rested her crutch on the ground before leaning against it.

"Thanks," she said to Fishlegs with a genuine smile.

"No problem," Fishlegs replied, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

"Um, Fishlegs?" Astrid said with a slightly awkward tone.

"Yeah?" Fishlegs questioned.

"I'm going to need my hand back," Astrid said, nodding towards her other hand which was still firmly clasped in Fishlegs'.

"Oh!" Fishlegs exclaimed, releasing her hand like he had been burnt, his face flushing bright red in embarrassment, "S-Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Astrid repeated, grasping her crutch with both hands and lowering her head in order to hide the small smile on her face, "I should get going."

"Do you want me to help me back to your house?" Fishlegs offered nervously.

"No, I got it," Astrid replied with a chuckle as she began to hobble in the direction of her house, "Thanks though."

"Uh, no problem," Fishlegs replied, waving awkwardly towards her, "Have a good night."

"You too," Astrid replied as she began to walk away, but stopped after a few feet, "Hey, Fishlegs?"

"Uh, yeah?" Fishlegs asked.

"I think you have a lot better chances with someone like me than you give yourself credit for," Astrid said with a genuine smile before turning and limping away again. As she left, Fishlegs watched her go, standing stock still as a blush spread across his face. After she had disappeared, Fishlegs sighed and scratched the back of his head before turning and slowly making his way towards the smithy, pausing for a moment to glance over his shoulder in the direction Astrid had gone it before continuing on.

Smoke rose out of the smithy chimney as Hiccup stoked the fires of the forge with the bellows. Meanwhile, Merida stood at Hiccup's drawing table, looking over a sketch he had quickly done after they had arrived.

"Ye sure this will work?" Merida questioned, "Nae 'at Ah doubt ye, but Ah've ne'er seen anythin' like this afore."

"I know," Hiccup said as he let the bellows rest and turned towards Merida, "But I think it's the only way were going to get Toothless to fly again."

As he finished, Fishlegs entered the smithy, a thoughtful look on his face.

"Hey Fishlegs," Merida greeted him friendly, "Whit did Astrid want tae talk about?"

The question seemed to snap Fishlegs back to reality, causing him to play with his hands nervously.

"Oh, nothing really," he said unconvincingly, "Justâ€|you knowâ€|stuff."

There was a pause as Hiccup and Merida merely looked at Fishlegs with blank expressions.

"Justâ€|stuff?" Hiccup repeated, clearly not believing anything his friend was saying.

"Why daenae ye want tae tell us?" Merida asked.

"Look, she asked me not to, okay?" Fishlegs pleaded, "Don't make me tell."

Merida and Hiccup shared a look before Hiccup sighed and smiled at Fishlegs.

"Don't worry, bud," Hiccup said, leaning against the bellows, "We understand."

"Thanks guys," Fishlegs said with a smile as he walked further into the smithy, "So what exactly are you working on?"

"I'm building a replacement wing for Toothless," Hiccup explained.

"What now?" Fishlegs questioned.

"I'm building a replacement fin for Toothless' tail to let him steady himself while he flies," Hiccup elaborated, "Can you hand me some of that iron?"

Nodding, Fishlegs handed Hiccup some long lengths of iron, which the smaller boy took and placed in the hot coals.

"You need some help?" Fishlegs offered.

"Sure," Hiccup accepted, "If all of us work on this together, we can get this done before the night is over."

While Fishlegs helped Hiccup with his work at the forge, following Hiccup's lead, Merida began stitching lengths of heavy cloth together.

"Guess all those stitchin' lessons with ma mother werenae a waste," Merida said as she proudly held a length of her finished work up for

the boys to see.

"Nice job, Mer," Hiccup congratulated her as he walked over and held up a long metal rod up to the cloth to make sure it was the right length.

Hours passed, the only sound in the smithy was the light conversation between the three teens and the pounding of hammer against metal. Eventually, after all the pieces had been built and assembled, Hiccup stood with a mechanical, folding fin made of iron and heavy cloth, that was a few inches longer than he was tall.

"Wow," Fishlegs said in wonder, "Do you think it will work?"

"Only way we'll know is if we test it," Hiccup replied, snapping the fin closed and tucking it under his arm, "I should bring it back to my house to make sure Gobber doesn't find it."

"Good idea," Fishlegs agreed, before yawning loudly as the three of them made their way out of the smithy, "Now, if you guys don't mind, I'd like to get some sleep before the sun comes up."

"Sounds like a good idea," Merida agreed, "See you tomorrow, Fishlegs."

"See you guys tomorrow," Fishlegs echoed before heading off in the direction of his house and disappearing into the night. Merida and Hiccup watched him go before turning and heading in the direction of their own home. As they walked, Hiccup readjusted the fin so that he could better carry it.

"Ye need some help with 'at?" Merida offered.

"No, I got it," Hiccup replied as he adjusted it again, "Big, strong Vikings like me don't need help carrying stuff like this."

"Oh, ye're a big, strong Viking now, are ye?" Merida teasingly questioned.

"Yeah, didn't you notice?" Hiccup huffed as he readjusted his grip for a third time, "I've been working out."

"Yes, Ah can clearly see th' definition on those boney arms o' yers," Merida joked, rolling her eyes at him.

"Wow, and here I thought my girlfriend would try and give me positive reinforcement," Hiccup groused facetiously.

"Ye're jist jealous because Ah hae bigger muscles then ye," Merida joked, before noticing Hiccup was losing his grip on the fin again, "Really though, let me help ye."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," Hiccup agreed as he came to a stop and set the fin on the ground, "Just let me set it down for a second."

As Hiccup placed the fin on the ground, Merida happened to glance around the village, which she got a good view of from their position higher up on the hill. Most of the buildings appeared merely as shapes in the darkness, indistinguishable from one another. However,

Merida could clearly make out the arena from its position nearly on the opposite side of the village. A pensive look crossed her face that was not missed by Hiccup.

"Something wrong, Mer?" Hiccup questioned.

"Nae, jist thinkin'," Merida replied, not taking her eyes away from the arena.

"What are you thinking about?" Hiccup pressed, setting the fin aside.

"It's jist," she began hesitantly as she tried to find the right words to explain what she was thinking as she turned to look at him, "Dae ye think we cud teach th' other dragons tae trust us? Ye know, like how Toothless has started tae?"

"I guess so," Hiccup answered with a shrug, "I mean, we'd probably have a harder time with it, seeing as we've been fighting them and all, but I wouldn't say it'd be impossible. I mean, we shot down Toothless but that hasn't stopped him from warming up to us. Why are you thinking about this?"

"Taeday in th' arena, with th' Nadder, it felt like we made, Ah daenae know, a connection or somethin'," Merida explained, running her hand through her hair in frustration.

"This is the same Nadder that was specifically trying to kill you, right?" Hiccup questioned, raising an eyebrow at Merida.

"Ah'm nae actin' like Ah understand it," Merida answered with a frustrated sigh, shooting him an annoyed glare, "Ah'm jist tellin' ye how it felt."

"Sorry," Hiccup replied, holding his hands up defensively in front of himself, "I'm just trying to understand what you're thinking."

"Ah'm sorry too," Merida said with a sigh, "Ah've ne'er been good at taking ma thoughts an' getting them oot there, ye know?"

"Trust me, I know," Hiccup replied with a chuckle, "and I'm not saying you didn't form some kind of bond with that Nadder. I'm just as new to this whole "making-friends-with-dragons" thing as you are, so what do I know, right?"

Merida let out a chuckle of her own as she smiled at him.

"We'll just have to wait and see," Hiccup surmised with a shrug, "I mean it's not like we're going to break into the arena and let the Nadder out tonight just to see what would happen."

"Aye," Merida agreed in a low voice as she looked back towards the darkened shape of the arena, "Nae taenight at least."

"So, let's head home, shall we?" Hiccup asked as he picked up the fin and lay one end of it across his shoulders.

"Let's," Merida agreed, walking over and resting the other end of the fin on her shoulders. Reaching up, the two used their hands to steady the fin. As they did, Hiccup's left hand touched Merida's right.

Looking at each other, the two teens smiled as their cheeks turned rosy before Hiccup lay his hand over Merida's and they made their way back to the house.

A/N: A bit of a short chapter again, but I had a lot of fun with the character interactions in this one. Hope you guys liked it too! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

20. Spread Your Wings

**Chapter 20: Spread Your Wings **

The sound of heavy hooves clomping through the undergrowth echoed among the trees as Merida lead Angus behind her, Fishlegs and Hiccup walking along with her through the forest. Angus snorted in annoyance as he tried to shake off the mechanical fin and basket of fish they had tied to his back, causing Merida to look over her shoulder and glare at him.

"Och, stop complainin', ye big wuss," Merida snapped at him, causing Angus to snort back at her, "We're almost there."

"You sure it was a good idea to bring him, Merida?" Fishlegs questioned, glancing at the horse over, "I mean, I don't think he's going to fit into the cove."

"Well, if ye'd rather carry th' fin an' 'at basket o' fish, Ah'm sure Angus wud be happy tae oblige ye," Merida replied with a snort.

"Point taken," Fishlegs replied with a smirk and a shrug. A moment later, the walls surrounding the cove came into view as the three teens and the horse came over a hill. Stopping by the entrance to the cove, the teens unloaded the equipment from Angus' back, causing the horse to shake and snort in appreciation.

"Now, ye wait here, Angus," Merida instructed, patting the horse's head while Fishlegs slung the basket of fish over his shoulder and Hiccup balanced the fin across his, "We shudnae be too long."

The horse snorted in reply before turning and wandering over to a patch of grass that he began to munch on. Turning back to the others, Merida helped Hiccup lift up the fin and the three teens made their way into the cove.

As they made their way into the cove, the three teens saw that Toothless was sleeping near the waterfall that deposited the water into the cove's lake.

"Hey Toothless," Hiccup greeted the dragon in a singsong voice as the three teens approached the dragon, causing it to perk up and watch them with curiosity, "We've got breakfast. We hope you're hungry."

As Hiccup spoke, Fishlegs put the basket of fish on the ground and pushed it over, emptying its contents onto the ground in front of Toothless.

"Okay, that's disgusting," Hiccup muttered, turning his nose up to the smell as Fishlegs gagged and quickly backed away. The three teens wearily moved away as Toothless sniffed the air and began to cautiously approach the pile of fish.

"We've got some salmon, some cod, and even a whole smoked eel," Hiccup talked as he and Merida began circling around Toothless with the fin. At the mention of the eel, Toothless suddenly snarled and backed away from the pile of fish. Raising an eyebrow, Merida leaned down and grabbed the dead eel by its tail and held up. As she brought it closer to Toothless, the dragon snarled viciously as it shied away.

"No, no, no, no!" Hiccup said, holding out his hand to stop Toothless from approaching as Merida quickly tossed the eel away. This seemed to placate Toothless, who turned his attention back to the pile of fish.

"Yeah, I don't really like eel either," Hiccup commented as Toothless began to eat into the pile of fish.

"That's it, that's it," Hiccup whispered soothingly as he, Merida and Fishlegs slowly moved around towards Toothless' tail while the dragon devoured the fish in front of them, "Don't mind us. We're just minding our own business."

Laying the fin down next to Toothless' tail on the ground, Hiccup carefully lined it up with the dragon's injured appendage. As they lined up the fin, Toothless shifted his tail away, causing the three teens to jump in surprise. Glancing over, they could see Toothless was still distracted by the pile of fish. As they tried to line up the fin with Toothless' tail, the dragon kept moving it as he dug into the fish.

"This isnae workin'," Merida growled in frustration before she tossed her bow and arrows away and sat down on the dragon's tail as Toothless stuck his head into the basket in an effort to get more fish, using her weight to hold the appendage down.

"Hurry up an' put it on," Merida whispered. Nodding, Hiccup and Fishlegs pushed down on the tail as well. As they did, Toothless suddenly jerked forward, causing them to lose their grip. Growling in frustration, Hiccup spun around and sat on the tail as well while Merida scooted back to give him room. Meanwhile, Fishlegs moved to the tip of the tail and held it down while shifting the fin into place with Hiccup.

Quickly wrapping one of the securing belts around Toothless's tail, Hiccup pulled it tight to ensure that the fin did not fall off. As Hiccup and Fishlegs worked to secure the other belts, Toothless raised his head out of the basket, a look of confusion on his face. A look of surprise crossed Toothless' face as he felt Hiccup and Fishlegs secure the fin to his tail. Slowly, unnoticed to the teens, Toothless began to spread his wings. As he did, Hiccup and Fishlegs sat back, smiling at their handiwork.

"Looks good, lads" Merida observed with a smile as Hiccup adjusted the fin, spreading it out further.

"Do you think it will work?" Fishlegs questioned.

"There's really only one way to-WHOA!" Hiccup exclaimed, cut off midstatement as Toothless shot into the air, dragging Merida and Hiccup with him as they instinctively wrapped their arms around the dragon's tail, the sudden burst of wind knocking Fishlegs onto his rear as he watch his friends fly away with wide eyes.

"Hiccup!" Merida screamed over the whipping wind, holding onto Toothless' tail for dear life, "Dae somethin'!"

His mind racing a mile a minute, Hiccup looked down at the fin in front of him, rippling in the wind, still closed against Toothless' tail. As Hiccup saw this, Toothless began to fall out of the, sending the three of them hurtling towards the ground. While Merida let out a scream of mortal terror, Hiccup grabbed hold of the fin and yanked it open, causing Toothless to go shooting into the open sky.

"It's working!" Hiccup exclaimed happily as Toothless climbed to a dizzying height.

"Brilliant!" Merida shouted back, half excitedly, half sarcastically, "Now whit dae we dae!?"

"I'm working on it!" Hiccup yelled as he yanked the fin to the side, causing Toothless to bank sharply back towards the cove, the dragon gliding just a few feet above the surface of the lake.

"Yes!" Hiccup shouted excitedly "We did it! It works!"

As Merida let out a whoop of excitement and joy, Toothless glanced back at them with a confused look, before an annoyed expression crossed his face and he turned sharply to the side, causing his tail to whip around sharply and fling Merida and Hiccup off, sending them skipping across the surface of the lake before plunging in with a mighty splash. A second later, Toothless let out a screech of surprise before crashing into the lake as well.

"Great Odin's raven!" Fishlegs exclaimed as he ran towards the edge of the lake as Hiccup and Merida swam back to the surface, dragging the empty basket with him, "Are you guys alright!?"

"Are ye kiddin'!?" Merida exclaimed as she swam to shallower water and stood up, throwing her arms into the air triumphantly as her damp hair swung around wildly, "'At was amazin'! We were flyin'!"

"We also almost died," Hiccup stated as he wiped his wet hair out of his face, earning an annoyed glare from Merida before he smiled excitedly at her, "But yeah, we were flying, and that was awesome!"

"That was pretty incredible guys," Fishlegs added wistfully, "Wish I could have been up there with you guys."

"You'll get your chance, bud," Hiccup replied as he tried to shake some of the water out of his ears. As he did, Toothless pulled himself out of the water, grumbling to himself before wandering over to a sunny patch of the cove and began to dry himself in the warm sunlight.

"Just not today," Hiccup added with a nervous smile.

"Aye," Merida agreed, ringing some water out of her hair, "Ah have a feelin' 'at if we tried somethin' like 'at again taeday, Toothless is likely tae eat us fer lunch."

"Speaking of which, we should be heading back to the village," Fishlegs said, looking up at the sun to judge the time, "We don't want to be late for Gobber's dragon lesson this afternoon."

"Right," Merida agreed, before looking over at Toothless, who had swung his tail around to look at the mechanical fin attached to it. Looking closely at the fin, Toothless narrowed his eyes as he tried to flick the fin open to no avail. Grumbling, Toothless turned away from his tail before laying his head down and closing his eyes.

"Dae ye think we shud try tae take th' fin?" Merida asked, turning to look at Hiccup.

"Probably better if we let him keep it," Hiccup replied as he looked over at the grumpy dragon.

"Well, I guess we should be getting back then," Fishlegs stated as he lifted his bag back onto his shoulders. As he did, Merida glanced back at the lake before tucking a stray hair behind her ear and looking up at the hot summer sun.

"You coming, Mer?" Hiccup asked as he and Fishlegs moved towards the exit of the cove.

"Ah'll catch up with ye lads," Merida replied as she looked back at them, "There's somethin' Ah wanted tae check oot. Ah'll grab Angus, sae daenae worry about me bein' late."

Hiccup looked at Merida in confusion for a few moments, prompting her to make a shooing at him. He looked towards Fishlegs for some insight into what was going on, but the larger boy merely shrugged before motioning for them to leave.

"Alright, see you back at the village," Hiccup replied, waving at her before turning and leaving with Fishlegs. Merida waved back and watched them leave before turning back to the lake. She began pulling off her wet vest, noticing Toothless watching her with a curious eye.

"Ye know," she said to the dragon as she tossed her vest onto a large rock before starting to pull her shirt over her head, "It's been awhile since Ah've had a nice swim."

Meanwhile,

As the two Viking teens made their way through the forest back towards the village, Fishlegs held the empty basket out in front of him, peering into its insides.

"I still can't believe he ate all of those fish," Fishlegs commented.

"He's a big dragon," Hiccup explained with a shrug.

"Imagine if he was bigger," Fishlegs mused as he slung the basket

back over his shoulder, "Imagine how much he would eat then."

"Kind of a scary thought," Hiccup replied with a chuckle.

"More than kind of," Fishlegs stated seriously, "It would probably be terrifying."

"Maybe not the best thing to be thinking about right now," Hiccup pointed out.

"Yeah, you're right," Fishlegs replied before another thought occurred to him, "You know it was pretty weird the way he hated that eel."

"Yeah," Hiccup agreed with a pensive look on his face, "I wonder if that's true for all dragons."

As Hiccup said that, he suddenly came to a dead stop, Fishlegs walking a few feet before noticing Hiccup was no longer walking with him and turning to look back at his friend.

"What is it?" Fishlegs asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You go on ahead," Hiccup replied, motioning towards the direction the village was in, "I'm going to go back to that cove and grab that eel. I want to see if it has the same effect on other dragons as it does on Toothless."

"What about Merida?" Fishlegs questioned.

"She probably just needed to relieve herself or something," Hiccup replied dismissively as he began making his way back towards the cove, "She's probably already on her way to catch up with us."

"Alright, see you back at the village," Fishlegs replied with a wave before heading back towards the village.

"See you," Hiccup stated before disappearing into the forest.

For a few minutes, Fishlegs walked alone through the woods, humming as the birds twittered amongst themselves in the forest canopy. As he came over a small hill, Fishlegs accidentally kicked something hard and heavy, almost causing him to trip and fall onto his face.

Turning back to look at what he had tripped over, Fishlegs put the basket on the ground as he noticed a large, black rock sitting nearby. Walking over to it, Fishlegs leaned down and picked it up, holding it in front of his face to examine it closer.

"This looks like one of those black rocks Hilde was collecting," Fishlegs mused as he turned the rock over in his hands.

"Indeed it is, Leser," an old, familiar voice suddenly said from behind him, causing Fishlegs to let out a cry of surprise and fear as he fumbled the rock in his hand. Getting a good grip on the rock, he spun around with it raised to strike whatever had surprised him. Instead, what Fishlegs found was Hilde standing behind him, grinning up at him.

"Going to shtrike a defenseless old voman, Leser?" Hilde questioned as her pet crow cawed angrily at Fishlegs.

"No," Fishlegs replied as he caught his breath and lowered his arm, "You just surprised me is all."

"My apologizes," Hilde stated with a smirk, "Sometimes I forget howâ€|quiet I can be."

"That's an understatement," Fishlegs snorted before looking down at the rock in his hand, "What are you doing out here anyway?"

"Gazering zis and zat," Hilde explained, motioning towards the basket she was carrying that held various berries, herbs and roots.

"Speaking of which, you said this was one of the rocks you were collecting before?" Fishlegs asked, holding up the rock he was carrying.

"Indeed it is," Hilde assured him as she reached down and picked a herd growing out of the ground near Fishlegs' foot.

"Why is it here?" Fishlegs asked, looking at the rock with confusion, "From what I know about mining, minerals usually bunch together below the surface."

"Oh, zat's simple," Hilde replied as she began to wander away prompting Fishlegs to follow her, "Zey don't come from zee earth."

"If they don't come from the earth then where do they come from?" Fishlegs questioned in confusion.

"Dragons," Hilde replied simply as she leaned down and picked a few berries from a nearby bush.

"What do you mean dragons?" Fishlegs inquired.

"You know vhat dragons hafe to do to breathe fire, correct?" Hilde asked as she continued to gather materials from the surrounding forest.

"They have to chew on brimstone," Fishlegs replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Indeed," Hilde replied with a nod, "But do you know vhat happens vhen zat passes srough a dragon's system?"

"Umâ€|no I don't," Fishlegs answered, shaking his head.

"Vell, as zee brimstone passes srough zee dragon's bowels, it mixes with zee food zee dragon eats and zeir own digestife juices," Hilde explained as she sorted some of the things in her basket while looking up at Fishlegs, "Vhen it comes out zee other side, it results in vhat you see before you."

"â€|Excuse me?" Fishlegs asked as his brain rushed to process what

Hilde was telling him.

"Black rock is solidified dragon feces," Hilde said plainly.

An utterly shocked look crossed Fishlegs' face as Hilde turned and began walking away.

"I must be getting home now, Leser," Hilde said as she disappeared into the brush, "I'm sure you must be going as well. Hafe a nice day!"

Fishlegs said nothing as Hilde left, simply staring at the spot she had been standing in. After a few moments, he turned his hand so the rock fell out of his hand, landing on the ground with a thud and kicking up a small cloud of black dust. Fishlegs quickly dusted off his hands before vigorously wiping it on his tunic before turning and wandering back towards the village with a completely blank look on his face.

Meanwhile,

As Hiccup reached the cove, he noticed Angus standing near the entrance, eating some grass. Hiccup was honestly surprised to see the horse, figuring that Merida would have left already. Shrugging, he made his way into the cove.

Entering the cove, Hiccup scanned the area. Toothless was where the three teens had left him, sunbathing on the ground. However, Merida was nowhere to be seen. Before Hiccup put any more thought into that fact, his eye caught the black and yellow coloring of the dead eel lying near the lake. Walking over to it, Hiccup picked up the eel and smiled at it before tucking it into a pocket of his vest.

As he closed his vest, Hiccup heard a gasp come from the direction of the lake. Looking over towards the sound of the voice, Hiccup saw Merida standing in the shallows of the lake, looking at him with wide eyes. It took a moment for Hiccup to realize that Merida was not dressed as she usually was. Instead, she only wore the chest bindings that were common for Viking girls to wear along with a pair of tight briefs. As a result, Hiccup saw more of Merida than he had ever had before, from her bare midriff to her exposed shoulders to the majority of her long slender legs. Her hair hung free, the wet locks draped around her shoulders with a few loose strands hanging in front of her face.

As Hiccup's face began to glow bright red as he openly stared at Merida, the girl quickly covered her body with her hands and crouched into the water to obscure herself.

"Hiccup!" she exclaimed, her face glowing as red as her hair, "Whit are ye daein' here!?"

"I-I-I w-w-wasâ€¦ I was j-justâ€¦ th-the eelâ€¦ you see I-I wasâ€¦" Hiccup quickly stammered, trying to find the words that would somehow, someday explain why he was standing there staring at her like some kind of moronic pervert. As his brain failed to provide any sort of answer, his feet took over, spinning him around to face away from Merida as he stood ramrod still.

"I'm so sorry!" Hiccup exclaimed, his face burning so hot he was

legitimately concerned that his hair was going to catch fire,
"Youâ€¦|you have absolutely no idea how sorry I am!"

"W-Why did ye come back!?" Merida stammered, glancing at the rock where her clothes lay so very far away.

"Iâ€¦|I was looking for the eelâ€¦|" Hiccup explained.

"Th' eel?" Merida asked incredulously as she looked at the back of Hiccup's head like he was stupid.

"Me and Fishlegs, you know him, well, we thought it was weird that Toothless, like, didn't like it, the eel that is, and we were wondering if, you know, it would have the same effect on other dragons, maybe," Hiccup rambled as he tried to explain himself.

Merida said nothing as she continued to crouch in the water, figuring that was a perfectly good explanation as to why the young man was there.

"I'm really sorry, Merida," Hiccup apologized, "I had no idea you were going for a swim."

"It-It's nae yer fault, Hiccup," Merida replied, beginning to relax a little, "It's ma fault fer nae tellin' ye whit I was daein'."

"All the same, I-I guess I should be heading back to the village," Hiccup replied, motioning in the direction that the village was in, "So, I guess I'll see you there."

"Wait!" Merida exclaimed, standing up and holding out her hand, causing Hiccup to freeze in place, though he remained facing away from Merida.

"Huh?" Hiccup asked dumbly.

"Wud yeâ€¦|" Merida began nervously, before taking a deep breath and continuing, "Wud ye like tae join me?"

The question shocked Hiccup to his very core. This was the last thing he was expecting. Did this girl, no this pretty girl, no this half naked, pretty girl, no this half naked, pretty girl who was also his girlfriend really want to go swimming with him? The shock sent his mind reeling so much that he simply stood there, for so long in fact that Merida began to grow worried.

"Hiccup?" Merida asked gently as she walked out of the water and over to where Hiccup was standing, mud caking her wet feet, "Hic, are ye okay? Ah'm sorry if Ah offended ye."

"Offended me?" Hiccup asked with a surprised laugh, "The last thing I'm feeling right now is offended."

"Thenâ€¦|whit's th' matter?" Merida asked, feeling suddenly self-conscious again, making an effort to obscure her body with her hands.

"Honestly?" Hiccup asked, letting out a nervous chuckle, "You're the most gorgeous girlâ€¦|no, the most gorgeous woman that I've laid eyes

on, and now you're standing right behind me, half-naked and soaking wet, and I'm legitimately worried that if I turn around and look at you, I'm going to pass out, or be blinded by your beauty orâ€¦something to that effect."

Merida was struck silent by this revelation. She knew Hiccup was attracted to her, he had said as much to her before. But never could she have imagined him saying something like this. At first, she flushed so brightly that she wouldn't have been surprised if she was red from head to toe. Then all at once, her confidence returned with a fury. This boy, no this man, this wonderful man, thought she was gorgeous. Not pretty. Not beautiful. Gorgeous. She'd be damned if she wasn't going to show her appreciation.

"Hic," she said, reaching out and placing her hands on his shoulders, "Hic, look at me."

"I really can't," Hiccup replied, letting out another nervous chuckle as he stiffed under Merida's touch.

"Yes, ye can," Merida whispered into his ear, leaning forward and pressing herself against his back while resting her chin on his shoulder, "Ye're gaein' tae hae tae at some point. We're betrothed, remember?"

"Oh trust me, I remember," Hiccup answered, goose bumps standing up on the back of his neck as he felt Merida's breath against his skin.

"Then look at me," Merida said gently before slowly spinning him around to face her, Hiccup either unable or unwilling to resist her. He was, however, able to squeeze his eyes closed as possible.

"Open yer eyes, Hiccup," Merida stated with an amused giggle as she reached up and cupped his face, causing Hiccup to suck in his breath, "Open them fer me."

Slowly, carefully, Hiccup opened his eyes until his green eyes peered into her icy blue ones. For a few moments, the two just stared at each other, Hiccup unwilling to look away from her face.

"It's alright," Merida reassured him with a shy grin, her blush returning, "Ye're allowed tae look at me."

"I'mâ€¦allowed?" Hiccup asked with a nervous chuckle.

"Aye," she laughed back, reaching up and running a hand through his auburn hair, "Ye an' ye alone."

Gulping, Hiccup slowly allowed his eyes to fall from her gaze to look at the rest of her. As he observed her, Merida's face reddened, feeling simultaneously more confident and more vulnerable than she had ever felt before. Eventually, Hiccup's eyes returned to her, his gaze so full of warmth that it made her weak in the knees.

"You're more beautiful than I imagined," Hiccup whispered, causing Merida to smile broadly at him.

"Come swim with me," Merida whispered, reaching down and taking Hiccup's hands in hers.

"Iâ€¦I think I'm a little overdressed," Hiccup replied.

"Then get undressed," Merida stated simply, running her eyes up and down Hiccup's body, "Ah've shown ye mine, now it's time fer ye tae show me yes, sae tae speak."

Hiccup's face was beat red as he thought over Merida's words.

"Ah can turn around if 'at wud help?" Merida offered.

"Iâ€¦I think it might," Hiccup replied, a large amount of sweat forming on his forehead.

"All right," Merida said with a sultry voice as turned around and walked back towards the lake, throwing an extra swing in her hips as she walked, glancing over her shoulder to look at Hiccup, "Come join me in th' water when ye're ready."

As Merida made her way back into the water and began to swim around, Hiccup quickly but cautiously took off his clothes until he was dressed merely dressed in his briefs, showing off the majority of his pale, lean body. As he made his way over to the lake shore, Merida pulled herself up onto a rock and leaned against it, smiling at Hiccup.

"Hi there, handsome," Merida cooed, looking at Hiccup with half-lidded eyes.

"Handsome?" Hiccup asked, his face flushing as he walked into the water, "I think you got the wrong guy."

"Oh please," Merida replied as she swam over to Hiccup's side as he entered the lake up to his shoulders, the girl floating a few feet in front of him, her long hair fanning out in the water, "Ye're plenty handsome."

"I think you're seeing things, Mer," Hiccup replied, looking away from Merida, "I'm not what you'd call muscular or good-looking."

"Who ever said Ah find big, bulgin' muscles attractive?" Merida asked as she swam closer to Hiccup, reaching out and running her hand along his arm, tracing the muscles defined by years as a blacksmith with her thumb, "Ah prefer someone with a bit more of aâ€¦wiry build."

As Hiccup looked away from her, Merida reached up and cupped Hiccup's face, turning it to look at her.

"An' let's nae ferget those wonderful, warm, green eyes of yours," Merida whispered as she swam in closer to Hiccup, resting her other hand against his shoulder, his instinctively going to her waist.

"Sounds like there are a lot of things you like about me," Hiccup commented as the two moved closer together until their bodies were practically touching.

"Oh, we cud be here all day, gaein' through a list o' th' thin's Ah like about ye," Merida replied as she wrapped her arms around

Hiccup's neck, playing with the hair on the back of his head with her hand, "Can Ah tell ye somethin', Hiccup?"

"Anything," Hiccup whispered as he moved his head closer towards hers and partially closed his eyes.

"Ah was heartbroken when Ah found out ma parents had arranged a marriage fer me," Merida explained as she tilted her head to the side and moved closer towards Hiccup, their faces only inches apart as their eyes closed "But if Ah had known whit ye were like, known whit was waitin' fer me, Ah wud hae sailed th' boat over here maself."

As Hiccup and Merida's lips pulled, slowly, unceasingly closer to one another, Merida whispered a final thought.

"Ye're everythin' Ah ne'er knew Ah wanted."

With that, their lips met, slowly moving against one another as electricity seemed to jolt between their bodies like a completed circuit. For a moment, it seemed as if the entire world fell away, leaving only the two of them embracing in the endless water, sharing their first kiss.

Eventually, the two parted, their faces flushed. Slowly, they opened their eyes, looking right at one another as matching grins spread across their faces.

"Wow," Merida whispered.

"Yeah," Hiccup agreed with a chuckle, "My thoughts exactly."

"Did we really wait this long tae dae this?" Merida questioned.

"I guess we didn't know what we were missing," Hiccup replied with a shrug, before turning his attention skyward to check the position of the sun, "We should probably be heading back to the village."

"Ah think we can stay jist a wee bit longer," Merida commented as she pulled herself towards Hiccup, a grin on her face as she leaned in to kiss him, "Daenae ye think?"

"Yeah," Hiccup replied, leaning in towards her, "I guess a little while longer wouldn't hurt."

As the two teens continued to kiss in the placid waters of the small lake, Toothless watched from the shore out of curiosity. As he began to lose interest, he closed his eyes again and turned away, basking in the sun as he began to slowly hum a tune he had heard the redhead sing once before.

A/N: So, as you guys may have guessed, I had a lot of fun with this chapter! Hope you guys liked it too! Shout out to LordsFire for helping me come up with the "science" behind the black rocks! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

21. Double Trouble

****Chapter 21: Double Trouble****

Heavy hooves pounded against the ground, sending clumps of earth that had never known a horse's touch flying through the air as Angus raced through the forest, Merida at the reins with Hiccup desperately hung on by wrapping his arms around her stomach. Angus whinnied happily at being able to run free and Merida let out a whoop of joy. Hiccup however, had a pale face, looking entirely uncomfortable with the whole experience.

"Can we, maybe, slow down a little?" Hiccup asked as he tightened his grip on Merida.

"Whit's th' matter?" Merida questioned, glancing over her shoulder to look at Hiccup and flash him a playful smile, "Ye're nae scared are ye?"

"Me? Scared? No," Hiccup replied with a gulp as he glances back down at the earth whizzing past him, "Just not used to being on a horse is all."

"Hiccup, ye rode on a dragon taeday," Merida pointed out as Angus leapt over a fallen tree, almost causing Hiccup to fall off the horse's back, "We flew through th' sky! Are ye really scared o' fallin' off auld Angus here?"

"It's not the fall that worries me," Hiccup answered, sparing another glance at the ground shooting by just beneath him, "It's the landing."

"Ye worry too much," Merida chuckled as she shook her head, "Besides, if we didnae take Angus, we wud be late fer Gobber's lesson."

"We're probably still going to be late," Hiccup pointed out as he looked up at the sky and the sun moving across it.

"Well, even if we are," Merida said gently, turning to look back at him with half-lidded eyes as the village came into view, "Ah think we hae a good reason."

Before Hiccup could say anything, Merida leaned in and pressed her lips to his, a look of shock crossing Hiccup's face before it melted into a goofy smile. As Merida pulled back, she giggled at the smile plastered across Hiccup's face.

"My," Merida whispered, her blush spreading across her cheeks, "Ah cud get use tae 'at."

Hiccup nodded dumbly in response, causing Merida to giggle more before spurring Angus on, the increase in speed causing Hiccup to let out a cry of surprise as he almost fell off the horse's back again, eliciting more laughter from the red haired princess as they raced through the village.

As the arena came into view, Merida and Hiccup could see Astrid sitting on a stool near the entrance, her injured leg propped up on another stool and her arms crossed in front of her chest, her dark blue eyes glaring at everything and nothing. As she noticed the two approaching on the horse's back, she cocked an eyebrow.

"Running a little late, are we?" Astrid observed as Angus came to a

stop before her, "Get lost ridding?"

"Saemethin' like 'at," Merida replied neutrally as she dismounted from Angus before helping Hiccup down as a thought occurred to her, "Shudnae ye be inside with th' others?"

"I already know all the stuff he's teaching us," Astrid answered with a shrug, "It's not going to do me any good to watch the rest of you fight a dragon.

"Suite yerself," Merida said with a shrug.

As Hiccup dusted himself off, Merida looked at Angus as a thought occurred to her.

"Damn," Merida swore, "We daenae hae enough time tae get Angus back tae his stable."

"Can't we just leave him out here?" Hiccup suggested, as he glanced quickly at Astrid "He was fine when we were, you know, in the forest."

"He had grass tae munch on oot there," Merida replied, stroking Angus' neck, "Here in th' village, he's likely tae wander off an' then who knows whit trouble he'll get himself intae."

Angus snorted in reply, earning a smirk from Merida. As Merida and Hiccup talked, a thoughtful look crossed Astrid's face as she looked down at the ground. Astrid bit her lip nervously before sighing and turning her attention back to the two other teens.

"I can watch him," Astrid spoke up, causing Merida and Hiccup to turn and look at her in shock.

"Whit?" Merida asked in surprise.

"Leave him with me," Astrid clarified with a shrug, looking away so she didn't have to look the other two in the eye, "I'll make sure that he doesn't wander off."

"Whit are ye tryin' tae dae?" Merida questioned, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I'm trying to do you a favor," Astrid replied in a huff as she turned her gaze back to Merida, narrowing her dark blue eyes.

"Why?" Merida pressed, her suspicion mixing with confusion.

"Come on, Princess, you've saved my life twice now," Astrid explained, "The least I can do is watch your overgrown pony for a little while."

Merida didn't look satisfied with the answer. She looked over at Hiccup for some guidance, but all the young man could offer was a shrug.

"Look," Astrid continued, bringing Merida's attention back to her, "Your horse is like three times my size and I'm laid up with a busted leg. He poses more of a threat to me than I do to him."

This seemed to mollify Merida somewhat, but she still seemed uncertain, biting her bottom lip anxiously.

"Merida, I know I've given you every reason not to trust me," Astrid pressed, ignoring the surprised look Merida shot her as she continued talking, "but believe me, you can trust me with this."

"Alright," Merida said with a nod, a note of hesitation in her voice as she grabbed Angus' reins before slowly handing them over to Astrid, who took them and nodded towards Merida. Nodding back, Merida turned to face Angus.

"Alright, Angus," Merida said with a small grin as she stroked the horse's head, "Ye be good now, ye hear?"

Angus snorted in reply before nuzzling Merida's head, earning a chuckle from the girl.

"Alright, alright," Merida stated as she pushed Angus off and turned her attention towards Hiccup and held out her hand towards him, "Come on, Hic. We daenae want tae be late."

"Right," Hiccup agreed with a small nod as he took Merida's hand with a smile, "Let's go."

As Merida and Hiccup made their way down the short tunnel into the arena, Merida paused and looked back.

"Astrid!" Merida called hesitantly, causing the other girl to glance over her shoulder at the Highlander, "â€|Thanks."

Astrid replied with a simple wave as she turned back towards the village.

"What was that all about?" Hiccup whispered as he and Merida continued down the tunnel.

"Ah daenae know," Merida replied, sparing another glance in Astrid's direction, "If Ah didnae know any better Ah'd say she wasâ€|tryin' tae be nice."

As Merida and Astrid made their way into the arena, Astrid glanced up at Angus, who was looking back at her with his large brown eyes.

"So, what do you think?" Astrid asked the horse, "Good start?"

The horse merely snorted in reply and turned away from her.

"Yeah, well, what do you know?" Astrid groused,

Inside the arena, Hiccup and Merida found Fishlegs, Snotlout and the twins standing around Gobber near the center of the arena. Gobber raised his head as they entered and shot them a bemused smile.

"There ye two are," Gobber quipped, "Nice o' ye tae join us."

"Sorry," Merida apologized, "We lost track o' time."

"Ah'm sure ye did," Gobber replied, his smile growing larger as he turned and made his way towards one of the arena walls. As he did, Fishlegs raised an eyebrow at Hiccup who merely shrugged and gave his friend a look that said he would tell him later.

"Now taeday is all about teamwork," Gobber explained as he walked back over towards the teens carrying six buckets of water which he placed down before him, "Now Ah'm gaeing tae need ye lot tae break intae teams o' two."

Snotlout and Tuffnut quickly turned to each other before jumping up and bumping their chests against each other's. As they laughed, Merida rolled her eyes at the display before turning to Hiccup. Before she could say anything though, she felt a tap on her shoulder and found Ruffnut standing next to her.

"Hey Red," Ruffnut said with an all too large grin, as she pointed between herself and Merida, "You and me?"

Merida hesitated for a moment and glanced over at Hiccup, who nodded to her encouragingly. Merida took a deep breath before turning back to Ruffnut.

"Sure, Ruff," Merida answered with a slightly weary smile.

"Awesome," Ruffnut said excitedly as she did a fist pump, "We're going to kick so much ass!"

As Ruffnut celebrated, Merida turned to look at Hiccup, shooting him a bemused smile and a helpless shrug. Hiccup shrugged back at her as he smiled before he turned and looked at Fishlegs, raising his fist and bumping it against the other boy's.

"All right, if ye're all paired up, then we can get this started," Gobber stated as he made his way over to one of the heavily barred doors, "Each o' ye grab a bucket. Ye're gaeing tae need them."

Each of the teens quickly grabbed a bucket, sticking close to their partner as Gobber reached up and pulled the release lever. Less than a second later, the heavy door slammed open and a cloud of toxic green, foul-smelling gas came spewing out. The cloud expanded until it covered most of the arena, obscuring the teens view. They listened as something came slithering out, moving through the cloud just out of sight.

"Zippleback," Fishlegs whispered, earning a nod from Hiccup as the two stood back to back, peering into the dense gas, "It has razor sharp serrated teeth that inject venom for pre-digestion. It prefers ambush attacks and crushing its victims with its long tails."

"Lovely," Hiccup sighed as he looked around wearily.

"Th' Hideous Zippleback is an extra tricky dragon," Gobber stated unseen, "It prefers stealth tae a direct attack, an' will anly strike when its prey is most vulnerable."

As Gobber talked, the spreading gas slowly engulfed the teens. As it

did, they could hear something moving quickly around them, seemingly circling around them and darting past from every direction.

"A Zippleback has two heads, an' figurin' oot which ane is which is th' key tae defeatin' it," Gobber explained, "Ane spews th' gas, th' other ignites it. A dragon with a wet head cannae use its fire, sae yer job is tae figure oot which head is which."

Merida and Ruffnut stood back to back, their buckets at the ready, doing their best to somehow pin down the location of the dragon hiding in the gaseous fog.

"Alright Ruff," Merida said quietly, trying not to draw the Zippleback's attention, "We need tae keep focused if we're gaein' tae catch this dragon."

"Focused. Got it," Ruff repeated loudly, her eyes darting in every direction, looking for the Zippleback.

"We also hae tae be quiet," Merida continued, "We daenae want it tae find us afore we find it."

"Quiet. Right," Ruff repeated distractedly, not changing the volume of her voice, causing Merida to sigh.

"Most importantly, we hae tae remain-" Merida began but was cut off when Ruff suddenly spun to face a seemingly random direction.

"What was that!?" she screeched as she flung the contents of her bucket into the air, the water sailing through the gas and hitting nothing before splattering across the hard stone floor of the arena.

"â€|Calm," Merida deadpanned, looking at Ruff in annoyance.

"Oops," Ruffnut said embarrassedly, looking at Merida with a sheepish grin. Merida looked like she was going to say something more but instead shrieked in surprise when she and Ruffnut were suddenly doused with water. Turning, they saw Snotlout and Tuffnut emerging from the gas cloud, each carrying an empty bucket.

"Whit th' bloody Hel was 'at fer!?" Merida demanded angrily.

"We thought you were the dragon," Tuffnut mumbled, looking slightly frightened as Merida and his sister glared at him.

"Do we look like a dragon, idiot!?" Ruffnut asked, holding her arms out in an exasperated gesture.

"Well, you guys do kind of have a sort of dragonesque physique," Snotlout commented, before quickly backpedalling as the girls' glares intensified, "Not that there's anything wrong with-"

Snotlout was interrupted by Ruff hurling her bucket at him, hitting him square in the face and knocking him onto his back.

"Thank ye, Ruff," Merida stated evenly as she continued to glare at Snotlout who was busy trying to pick himself up.

"Don't mention it," Ruffnut replied, waving a hand dismissively at

Merida, "But now what do we do?"

"Ah'm thinkin', Ah'm thinkin'," Merida answered, before turning her head upward, "Hiccup! Ye there!?"

"Uh, yeah!" Hiccup replied from somewhere in the gas cloud, "Uh, What's up!?"

"What happened to being quiet?" Ruffnut asked as Snotlout and Tuffnut joined their side.

"Change o' plans," Merida elaborated, "Hiccup! We got tae get oot o' this cloud! Th' Zippieback has too much o' an advantage here!"

As if to prove her point, there was a loud hiss before a long slender tail suddenly whipped out from the gas and tripped the four teens, causing Merida to spill her bucket as she fell to the ground. Ruffnut and Tuffnut groaned in pain as they tried to regain their bearings, before two identical hisses caused them both to pause. Glancing up, each of the twins saw a head floating in front of their faces. The serpentine heads were a yellowish green in color, paler on the bottom then on the top with darker green blotches peppering the scaly skin. They each had forward facing, black on yellow eyes, flanking a pair of narrow nostrils. They had pairs of straight black horns growing out of their heads and a horn on their noses that curled back towards their faces. Their mouths were filled with dagger-like teeth, the ones on the bottom jaw longer than those on top and sticking out past their lips. Their long necks disappeared into the cloud of gas, black ridges running down their spines.

"Oh boy," the twins said at the same time as the two heads hissed again in unison, displaying long, red, forked tongues. Merida, watching from the side, gasped as she saw the heads rear back to strike.

"Snotlout!" Merida exclaimed as she reached out and grabbed the back of Ruffnut's shirt.

"I know, I got him!" Snotlout exclaimed as he reached out and grabbed Tuffnut's shirt before dragging him out of the way at the same time Merida pulled Ruffnut to safety. A second later the two heads lashed out, missing the Viking twins by inches and smashing into one another. As the two heads hissed angrily at each other, Merida and Snotlout quickly pulled the twins to their feet and the four of them beat a hasty retreat.

After a few seconds of running, Merida, Snotlout and the twins came stumbling out of the gas cloud, finding Hiccup and Fishlegs standing there, their buckets at the ready.

"You guys okay?" Fishlegs asked.

"Been better," Tuffnut grumbled as they all turned to face the gas cloud.

"Why are you all wet?" Hiccup asked as he looked at Merida with a confused expression.

"Long story," Merida replied, before shooting Hiccup a sly grin, "Besides, earlier ye made it seem like ye liked me when Ah'm all

wet."

A bright blush spread across Hiccup's features as he began to say something but was stopped by a loud, dual hiss that emanated from the dispersing gas cloud. A second later, the Zippleback came charging out of the cloud, revealing itself to the teen in all of its terrible glory. The dragon's necks both connected to a large, round body from which four stubby legs sprouted from, each ending in feet that had four sharp grey claws. Green, bat-like wings grew from its shoulders and a long tail grew from the back, splitting half way down into two smaller tails that ended in fins.

"So what's the plan!?" Tuffnut asked as the Zippleback bore down on them.

"We have to figure out which one of the heads is the igniter!" Hiccup stated as the six teens fanned out.

"And how, exactly, do we do that!?" Snotlout inquired as one of the heads lashed out at him, forcing him to dodge out of the way as he drew his mace from his belt.

"Working on that!" Hiccup replied.

As they talked, one of the Zippleback's head turned its attention towards Fishlegs. His eyes widened in surprise and fear as the dragon hissed at him. Taking a step forward, Hiccup heaved the bucket of water at the head, dousing it. The dragon narrowed its eyes as Fishlegs as it opened its mouth, green gas flowing out of its mouth.

"Oh, wrong head," Fishlegs stated with a nervous laugh. Before he could do anything more, the Zippleback screeched at him as it blasted him with the noxious green gas. Fishlegs coughed and gagged on the gas as he stumbled away, the head following him as it prepared to strike.

"Fishlegs!" Hiccup shouted before turning and tossing Snotlout his bucket of water, the other boy managing to catch it after it hit him in the chest.

"What do you want me to do with this!?" Snotlout exclaimed.

"Now, we know which head isn't the ignitor!" Hiccup replied, before pointing towards the other head, "Douse the one that is!"

"What are you going to do!?" Snotlout asked, shifting his grip on the bucket in one hand.

"Run interference!" Hiccup replied before drawing Endeavor from the sheath on his back and turning his attention to the Zippleback head.

As Fishlegs stumbled back, still stunned by the blast of gas, he tripped over an uneven stone, landing hard on his rear. Blinking his eyes clear, Fishlegs let out a cry of surprise as he saw the Zippleback head looming over him, preparing to strike. Before it could, Hiccup leapt between them, swinging his sword threateningly at the Zippleback. The dragon head hissed in anger as it shrank away from the sharp blade. Moving to the side, the Zippleback tried to

strike at Hiccup but he slashed at the dragon's head, slicing a shallow cut on the dragon's cheek, causing it to screech in pain as it pulled back, dark green blood oozing out of the wound.

Behind Hiccup, Merida grabbed hold of Fishlegs' arm and helped pull him to his feet.

"Ye okay?" Merida questioned.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Fishlegs replied, waving her off and drawing his hammer from his belt, prompting Merida to unsling her bow, "Caught me off guard is all."

"So, what's the plan?" Ruffnut asked as she ran over to their side while drawing her knife and hatchet.

"Like Hiccup said," Merida replied while notching an arrow and aiming it at the Zippleback head, "We run interference."

With that, Merida released the arrow, the missile glancing off the Zippleback's cheek, causing it to hiss in anger as it turned its attention to her, only for its attention to be brought back to Hiccup as he swung his sword at it again. Taking the cue, Ruffnut and Fishlegs ran at the Zippleback, doing their best to distract the head with attacks of their own.

Meanwhile, Snotlout was doing his best to get closer to the igniter head, but found himself on the defensive as it snapped its jaws at him. Screeching in anger and clicking its jaw in a way that sparks shot out of its mouth, the Zippleback head moved to strike at Snotlout, but was stopped when Ruffnut hopped in between them, armed with his two-headed spear which he used to stab at the dragon head.

"I'm not seeing an opening here!" Snotlout shouted, trying to get closer to the igniter head but unable to due to the Zippleback's quick movements.

"We have to distract them somehow!" Hiccup stated, hoping out of the way of the other head's bite.

"How do we do that!?" Tuffnut asked as he thrust his spear at the igniter head, causing it to hiss at him in anger.

"In th' cloud, we made them bang intae each other an' they seemed tae argue with each other about it," Merida stated as she aimed another arrow at the Zippleback head.

"So you think we should get them to hit one another?" Fishlegs asked.

"Sounds good to me!" Hiccup declared, taking another swing at the Zippleback.

"How do we plan on doing that!?" Snotlout asked.

"I've got an idea!" both Ruffnut and Tuffnut declared at the same time before running at their respective Zippleback heads, holstering their weapons and dodging out of the way as the dragon bit at them. Leaping up, they each grabbed one of the dragon's necks, wrapping

their arms around the Zippleback's throats as it tried to shake them off. Swinging their legs, the twins managed to pull themselves up onto the back of the dragon's necks, grabbing hold to the spines for stability. As the dragon tried to buck the twins, they made their way up to the dragon's heads, grabbing hold onto their horns once they had reached them.

"You thinking what I'm thinking!?" Ruff shouted to her brother, a wicked grin on her face.

"Oh yeah!" Tuff replied with a half-crazed laugh.

"On three!" they shouted in unison.

"One!" Tuff yelled.

"Two!" Ruff hollered in reply.

"Three!" they screamed in unison before using the Zippleback's horns as leverage to flip over onto the dragon's faces. Grabbing hold of the dragon's nose horns, the twins began making mocking faces and rude gestures as they attempted to insult the Zippleback. Incensed, the Zippleback began to violently shake its heads in an effort to get the twins off.

"Ready!?" Tuff asked, hanging off the Zippleback's nose to look back at his sister.

"You know it!" Ruff answered with a laugh.

"GO!" they shouted in unison, pushing off from the Zippleback's face and flying through the air at each other. Seeing this, both Zippleback heads reared back to strike, venomous teeth bared. As the Zippleback heads lunged at them, the twins reached out and grabbed each other, their opposite momentums stopping them cold and causing them to drop like stones out of the air, out of the path of the attacking dragon heads. Looks of surprised crossed the Zippleback heads before they slammed into one another, their hard heads knocking painfully together. As the twins landed and rolled across the hard stone floor of the arena, the Zippleback heads screeched angrily at one another, hissing and nipping at each other with their teeth.

"There's our chance!" Hiccup exclaimed, pointing at the fighting heads with his sword, "The igniter head is the one without the cut on its cheek!"

While the heads were distracted by their infighting, the teens ran up to the igniter head, leaping up and grabbing its neck, trying to use their bulk to pull it down. The igniter head shrieked in surprise as the teens dragged it down, the gas head looking on in shock. As the igniter head shrieked and struggled to escape the teens' grasps, Snotlout hopped up, ran over to the Zippleback head and slammed the bucket of water on to it, completely dousing the dragon head.

The teens cheered in victory as they moved away from the Zippleback, the igniter head now angrily trying to get the bucket that was wedged onto its face off.

"It worked!" Snotlout cried, almost not believing what had just

happened.

"I know!" Hiccup agreed, seemingly equally surprised.

"Now what?" Snotlout said with a laugh.

"Huh?" Hiccup asked, confused by the question.

"We put out the igniter head," Snotlout clarified, his smile falling slightly, "Now what do we do?"

A look of horrified realization passed over Hiccup's face as he turned to look at the Zippleback, just in time to see the igniter head shake off the bucket, sending it flying through the air before breaking into a pile of splinters as it slammed against the ground. It was then that Hiccup realized that even though the Zippleback couldn't ignite its gas, they still had a large, angry, venomous dragon to deal with.

"Move!" Hiccup shouted, shoving Snotlout to the side as one of the Zippleback's heads lunged at them, its teeth slicing through the open air where the cousins had been standing a moment before.

"What do we do now!?" Tuffnut shouted as he and the others scrambled around, desperately trying to avoid the Zippleback as it lashed out at them with teeth, tails and claws.

"I'm working on it!" Hiccup shouted back, just managing to move out of the way as the Zippleback slashed at him with its claws.

"Well workâ€¦look out!" Ruff shouted as she tackled Merida as one of the heads lunged at her, the Zippleback just grazing them, the force knocking the two girls to the ground.

"Thanks Ruff," Merdai said, before a worried look crossed her face as she heard Ruffnut let out a hiss of pain. Turning she saw Ruff push herself up into a sitting position, holding her hand up to her cheek, which Merida saw was reddening from blood.

"Ruff, are ye okay?" Merida asked worriedly.

"I don't feel so good," Ruff replied woozily, trying to stand only to fall back to the ground as her knees buckled underneath her. Merida gasped in shock as she rolled Ruffnut over and held the Viking girl's head in her hands. Merida could now see the thin, shallow cut across Ruffnut's cheek while the blonde's eyes fluttered and she mumbled incoherently.

"Ruff, what's wrong!?" Merida asked, not sure what she should do.

"It's th' Zippleback's venom," Merida heard Gobber say from behind her, moving out of the way as the blacksmith ran over to her and scooped Ruffnut into his arms, "It's debilitatin' an' works incredibly fast."

"Whit do we do?" Merida asked, as she looked at Ruffnut with a frightened expression, oblivious to the boys doing their best not to be struck down by the enraged Zippleback.

"We need tae get her tae Gothi," Gobber said simply, "She has an antidote. But Ah cannae dae 'at with this Zippleback runnin' amuck."

Nodding, Merida turned her attention back to the chaos behind her, pinpointing Hiccup in the madness.

"Hiccup!" she called, causing the young man to jump in surprise as he turned to look at her, "Ruff's been hurt! We hae tae end this quickly sae we can get her tae Gothi!"

"What!?" Tuffnut exclaimed, a panicked look on his face.

"That's a lot easier said than done, Mer!" Hiccup shouted, a note of exasperation in his voice, failing to notice as one of the Zippleback head's turned its attention towards him.

"Hiccup, watch oot!" Merida yelled with a panicked voice, giving Hiccup just enough time to turn around as the Zippleback head plowed into him, the dragon ramming its nose into his stomach, knocking the young man flat and pinning him against the ground. The Zippleback smiled wickedly, taking a sniff with its nose buried in Hiccup's stomach. As it did, its eyes suddenly went wide in shock before abruptly pulling away, shrieking in disgust. Hiccup watched in confusion as the Zippleback head shook back and forth as if trying to remove the offending odor from its nostrils. A look of realization passed over Hiccup's face before he opened his vest, finding the dead eel still stuck inside.

"The eel," Hiccup whispered to himself, "It's not just Toothless. Guys, I've got an idea!"

"What's is it!?" Snotlout asked turning to look at Hiccup just in time for the eel Hiccup threw at him to hit him dead in the face.

"Oh, what the Hel!? Did you just throw an eel at me!? Who does that!?" Snotlout demanded as he angrily pulled the offending eel off his face and shook it at Hiccup.

"The dragon doesn't seem to like it!" Hiccup explained, "Hold it up to one of its faces!"

"Are you serious!?" Snotlout questioned, glancing at the eel before looking at Hiccup like the other boy was crazy.

"Just do it!" Hiccup yelled back.

"Alright, alright!" Snotlout replied before turning his attention to the dragon. Running up to one of the heads, which was currently trying to swallow Tuffnut whole, Snotlout held the eel up to the Zippleback. The Zippleback took a quick sniff of the air before hissing in disgust, turning to look at Snotlout and shrinking away from.

"Seriously!?" Snotlout said in a mixture of joy and astonishment, moving towards the head and forcing the dragon to retreat, "This works!?"

"Snotlout!" Fishlegs shouted from his position near the other head,

holding his arms outstretched to the other boy, "Throw me the eel!"

Nodding, Snotlout turned and tossed the eel to Fishlegs, the larger boy grabbing it out of the air before spinning to face the Zippleback head, holding it before him and using it to drive the Zippleback back.

"Over here!" Merida called as she rejoined them, snagging the eel midstride as Fishlegs tossed it to her, using it to drive the Zippleback closer to its pen.

"Eel me! Eel me!" Tuffnut exclaimed, waving his hands in the air until Merida threw him the eel, stopping the Zippleback from biting him.

For the next minute, the teens drove the Zippleback back with the eel, passing between one another as needed. Eventually, they managed to get the dragon all the way back into its pen.

"Chew on that, Stinkbreath!" Tuffnut exclaimed as he tossed the eel into the pen with the Zippleback, causing the dragon to retreat into the far corner of its pen, hissing at the eel as the teens closed and sealed the door.

The teens took a moment to catch their breaths, shooting tired smiles at one another.

"Did we really just use an eel to beat a dragon?" Tuffnut asked disbelievingly.

"Seems like we did," Merida commented, tucking a loose strand of hair back behind her ear.

"Why the Hel did you have that eel with you anyway?" Snotlout questioned.

"Iâ€uhâ€|" Hiccup hesitated trying to find an appropriate answer to the question.

"It was part o' our lunch!" Merida interjected, a forced smile on her face, "We cudnae finish all th' food so Hiccup stuck it in his pocket fer later. Ne'er occurred tae us 'at th' dragon wudnae like it."

"All these new dragon-related discoveries are great an' all but right now, we hae tae get Ruff tae Gothi's," Gobber stated as he began to hobble towards the exit, the teens quickly following him as they remembered the gravity of the situation.

"Ah'll take her!" Merida shouted as she darted ahead, "Angus is here waitin' with Astrid, he can carry her faster than ye cud, Gobber."

"Aye," Gobber agreed, as the group exited the tunnel, causing Astrid to sit up straight and look at them in surprise, "Sounds like a good idea."

"W-What's going on?" Astrid asked as Merida snatched the reins from her hand and hopped up onto Angus' back, her eyes focused on Ruffnut,

"What's wrong with Ruff?"

"She got scratched by the Zippleback's tooth," Tuffnut explained gravely, his eyes not leaving his sister's form, "She got some of the venom in her."

"A scratch did that!?" Astrid asked in astonishment.

"Yeah, I don't want to think about what a full bite would have done," Snotlout mused.

"Trust me," Gobber said as he placed Ruffnut in front of Merida so she could hold the half-conscious girl up as she rode, "It's nae pretty."

"Sun above," Merida whispered as she looped her arms around Ruffnut, "She feels like she's on fire."

"We daenae hae any time tae lose then," Gobber stated gravely, "Now get gaein'!"

"Come on, Angus!" Merida called as she spurred the horse onwards, sending the Clydesdale into a full gallop through the village.

"Is she going to be okay?" Astrid asked, clearly worried but trying to hide it.

"It was jist a small scratch sae anly a little venom cud hae gotten intae th' wound," Gobber explained, watching Merida, Ruffnut and Angus disappear around a corner, "Certainly naethin' Gothi cannae handle. We'll hae tae wait an' see though."

"Screw that," Tuffnut spoke up as he began to jog in the direction Merida and his sister had went, "She's my sister, I'm not going to stand around and wait to see if she's okay."

Pausing, Tuffnut turned and looked over his shoulder at the others.

"Are you guys with me?" Tuffnut questioned.

Snotlout nodded without hesitation.

"Yeah, I'm with you man," he said as he began to jog to catch up with Tuffnut.

"I'm in too," Hiccup stated, turning to look at Fishlegs, "You coming, bud?"

"Yeah, I'm coming," Fishlegs agreed as he began to walk with Hiccup.

"So am I," Astrid stated as she forced herself to her feet and grabbed her crutch before limping along behind them.

"Ye lot gae on ahead," Gobber said, waving them off, "Ah hae some cleanin' up Ah need tae dae."

The teens nodded and began to make their way towards Gothi's. Tuffnut

and Snotlout wasted no time in running ahead, but Hiccup and Fishlegs hung back to keep pace with Astrid.

"You need some help, Astrid?" Hiccup asked, looking at the girl in concern as she struggled to keep moving forward. She had clearly healed a bit already but the long walk across the village and up the cliffs to Gothi's home was taking its toll on her.

"No," she growled stubbornly, her brow dotted with sweat, "I don't need help."

Hiccup shared a worried glance with Fishlegs but the two young men said nothing as they continued walking with Astrid trailing behind. With each step, Astrid grew more and more frustrated. Gritting her teeth, she glanced at the boys, to where she knew Gothi's house was, then back to the boys. Finally, scrunching her eyes closed as sweat began to drip down her face, she tossed the crutch aside while making a noise that sounded like the combination of a snarl and a shriek. Fishlegs and Hiccup stopped dead in their tracks, spinning around to look at Astrid in surprise.

"Is everything alright, Astrid?" Fishlegs asked nervously.

"Carry me," Astrid said simply, glaring at Fishlegs as she held her hands outstretched towards him.

"Excuse me?" Hiccup said in mute shock.

"I wasn't talking to you!" Astrid snapped at Hiccup, causing him to take a few steps away from her in fear as she turned her attention back to Fishlegs, never dropping her outstretched arms, "If we keep going like we're going, we won't make it to Gothi's before night fall, assuming I just don't collapse in the street before we make it."

Taking a calming breath, she continued in a more even tone.

"So Fishlegs, that's why I need you," she took another calming breath as she squeezed her eyes closed, "To carry me."

Hiccup and Fishlegs said nothing, just staring at Astrid in shock, sparing only a moment to glance at one another before looking back at Astrid.

"Well?" Astrid said impatiently, flexing her fingers in a "hurry up" motion.

"Are you sure about this, Astrid?" Fishlegs questioned, looking at the girl with an uncertain expression.

"Fishlegs," she growled threateningly, "If you don't pick me up in the next ten seconds, I'm going to use my crutch to beat you black and blue and then Hiccup can drag both of our worthless carcasses to Gothi's. Understand!?"

Fishlegs nodded rapidly as the blood left his face before he quickly jogged over to her. He stood next to her for a few moments, fussing with his hands as he tried to decide what the best way to pick her up was.

"Just pick me up!" she shouted at him to jump in fear and surprise before he reached down and scooped her up bridal-style. Wordlessly, Hiccup walked over and picked up Astrid's discarded crutch before the three of them began making their way towards Gothi's again.

"I swear if either of you breathes a word before we get there, I'll rip your heads off," Astrid growled as she crossed her arms, her bravado somewhat undercut by the blush spreading across her features.

A few minutes later, they came jogging up to Gothi's hut, which sat directly next to the large and ancient form of the village temple. It was a squat building, made out of stone and dark wood, two bronze braziers sat flanking the large, double doors, the burning flames illuminating the carving of a great tree on the doors.

Snotlout and Merida stood flanking the entrance to Gothi's hut, Snotlout leaning against the wall with his arms crossed while Merida stood nervously petting Angus's snout. They both looked up as the others approached, Merida raising a confused eyebrow while Snotlout smirked and chuckled.

"You working as Astrid's horse now, Fishlegs?" Snotlout quipped, causing Fishlegs to sigh and roll his eyes in annoyance as he came to a stop and set Astrid down. As soon as she was on her feet, Astrid surprised everyone by spinning around and decking Snotlout, knocking him to the ground as she glared at him.

"Ow!" Snotlout groaned, rubbing his jaw as he glared at Astrid, "What the Hel was that for?"

"For being an ass," Astrid replied as she held her hand out to Hiccup without looking at him, taking her crutch as he handed it to her.

"What, do you got a thing for him now or something?" Snotlout asked as he picked himself up, only to let out another cry of pain as Astrid punched him again, knocking him back down, "Okay, I'll be quiet now."

Giving a satisfied nod, Astrid turned to look at Merida.

"How is she?" Astrid asked neutrally.

"She's gaein' tae be okay," Merida said, and even though Astrid tried not to show it, the redhead could see the relief that swept over the blonde, "Gothi needed room tae work, sae she only let Tuffnut stay inside while she administered th' antidote."

As she said that, Tuffnut stuck his head out of the door, catching all of their attentions.

"Hey guys, Gothi's done in here and Ruff's coming around if any of you wanted to come in," Tuff explained before standing aside to let the others come in. Gothi's small hut was indeed crowded as the teens circled around the bed Ruffnut was laying, making sure to leave room for the short, old woman who was still tending to the blonde.

"Hey guys," Ruffnut greeted groggily, "Some day huh?"

"You can say that again," Astrid chuckled, "Seems like these training lessons are getting crazier every day."

"I hear that," Ruff replied, touching the bandage that Gothi had put on her cheek, "So Tuff was telling me you guys beat the Zippleback with an eel?"

"Really?" Astrid questioned looking at the others in surprise.

"Yeah, crazy, huh?" Hiccup asked, "Apparently dragons, or at least you know, Zippleback's don't like them."

"Weird," Ruff replied while shaking he head.

"Hey Ruff," Merida spoke up, "Ah hope ye daenae mind me askin' but how did ye an' Tuff dae all 'at stuff in th' arena?"

"Our dad's a woodsman by trade" Ruff explained, "Hunting, foraging, trapping, that kind of stuff. Me and Tuff spent a lot of time in the woods growing up, climbing trees and stuff like that."

"Yeah, if you think that move we pulled on the dragon was cool, you should see it done against a pack of pissed off squirrels," Tuffnut added, earning a laugh from the others.

"You should be good to go home now, child," Gothi spoke up as she handed Ruffnut a bottle of blue liquid, "Take some of that if you feel any of the symptoms come back."

"Thanks, Gothi," Ruffnut thanked the old woman.

"Think nothing of it," Gothi replied, waving her hand dismissively, "As for that bandage, it should be fine to take it off tomorrow, though the wound will have likely left a scar."

"You did say you wanted a scar, Ruff," Astrid pointed out.

"Yeah, and facial scares are the best," Ruffnut agreed, clearly pleased by the news.

"All right, off you all go," Gothi said, beckoning the teens to leave her home, "Time to leave an old woman to her peace and quiet."

The teens nodded and agreed, bidding Gothi goodbye as they left. As Astrid turned to leave, she felt Gothi's hand on her arm and turned to look down at the elder in confusion.

"Perhaps now is a good time," Gothi suggested as she glanced over at Merida, who was chatting amicably with Ruffnut. Astrid looked at Merida for a few moments, biting her bottom lip nervously before nodding her head.

"Alright," Astrid said with a nod, earning a pat on the arm from Gothi as the Viking girl began to limp over to Merida.

"Hey Merida!" Astrid called, stopping the Highlander who had begun to walk away with Hiccup, Angus and Fishlegs, "Can I talk to you for a second?"

Merida glanced at Hiccup who merely shrugged in reply.

"Uh sure, Astrid, Ah guess," Merida replied uncertainly as she turned to face the other girl, shrugging her shoulders as she did.

As Merida approached her, Astrid noticed Hiccup and Fishlegs waiting a few feet away. Astrid managed to catch Fishlegs' eye, giving him a pleading look to which Fishlegs responded with a nod.

"We'll let you girls talk," Fishlegs said as he took Hiccup by the shoulders and began to lead him away, "We'll go talk aboutâ€|guy stuff."

"Guy stuff?" Hiccup questioned, clearly not buying what his friend was saying.

"Just shut up and walk," Fishlegs mumbled while giving Hiccup a light shove, sending his friend stumbling back towards the village as he followed. Looking over his shoulder, Fishlegs gave Astrid a quick wink, to which she gave him a small smile.

"So, uh, whit did ye want tae talk aboot?" Merida questioned patting Angus' neck as the horse fed on the sparse grass surrounding Gothi's hut.

"Well, I didn't really want to talk," Astrid explained as she hobbled over to, and then sat on a nearby rock, "It's more I wanted toâ€|wanted toâ€|"

"Wanted taeâ€|whit?" Merida pressed, raising an eyebrow at Astrid.

"I wanted toâ€|" Astrid closed her eyes in frustration before sighing, "Apologize."

"Apologizeâ€|fer whit, exactly?" Merida questioned hesitantly, crossing her arms as she watched Astrid wearily.

"Everything, really," Astrid admitted with a shrug, "I haven't exactly been the nicest person to you."

"Really?" Merida asked neutrally.

"What?" Astrid questioned, caught off guard by what Merida had said.

"Oh, Ah was jist wonderin' if 'at's how ye're actually gaein' tae put it, because, if sae, it's th' understatement o' th' bloody century!" Merida spat angrily.

"Look, I'm trying to apologize here," Astrid shot back, her anger rising.

"Oh, good fer ye!" Merida replied sarcastically, "Ye finally figured oot 'at all Ah needed tae hear ye say was ye're sorry an' Ah'd ferget all aboot how ye insulted me. How ye tormented me! How ye broke th' bow ma father gave tae me an' attacked me with a knife!"

"Like you're any better!?" Astrid snapped, unable to control herself,

"I seem to recall you trying to kill Hiccup the first day you met him!"

"Really?" Merida asked incredulously, "Ye're really gaein' tae try an' compare th' situations!? Let's get some facts straight then, shall we, lassie? Whit Ah did was fueled by panic an' fear. Ah thought Ah was aboot tae be trapped in a loveless marriage surrounded by people who hated me, which ye did a lovely job o' reinforcin', by th' way. Ah acted on instinct an' Ah acted rashly. Daenae gae getting' me wrong, this daesnae justify whit Ah did. Ah'm damn lucky 'at Hiccup is th' type o' man who can fergive saemethin' as atrocious as whit Ah did, an' even then th' guilt still eats at me sometimes, thinkin' aboot whit Ah cud hae lost an' nae known it."

A look of sadness passed over Merida's features but it was quickly replaced with one of anger as she pointed a finger at Astrid.

"But ye daenae hae 'at excuse," Merida growled, taking a step towards Astrid and noticing the other girl's glare falter, "Ye an' Ah were at each others' throats multiple times an' ye knew whit ye were daein' each an' every time. Ye werenae lashing oot in anger or fear or anythin' like 'at. Ye were vindictive, full o' purpose an' hate. An' fer whit? Fer whit?"

Astrid didn't reply, looking down at the ground as Merida walked over and leaned down so their faces were level.

"Because yer father was killed in an invasion o' ma homeland, by ane o' ma people," Merida continued, "Nae murdered. Killed. In an invasion. A war yer people started in th' first place. An' he was killed nae by ma father, nae anyone Ah'm related tae, nae anyane Ah even know, a complete stranger who jist sae happened tae share ma homeland an', fer all either o' us know, died moments after he killed yer father. An' yet, ye decided 'at Ah'm th' ane 'at needs tae be punished."

Merida paused for a moment, silently glaring at Astrid, who continued to look at the ground.

"Ah daenae think Ah've ever heard saemethin' sae petty," Merida growled, "But Ah guess Ah shudnae be surprised, after all, ye're th' most petty, self-centered person 'at Ah've ever met. Ah know 'at Ah've been guilty o' bein' extremely selfish in th' past, but ne'er cud Ah hae imagined 'at someone cul care sae little fer other people, especially when they're sae hung up over th' loss o' a loved one."

"You don't know me," Astrid snapped, looking up and meeting Merida's glare.

"Ye're right, Ah daenae know ye," Merida agreed, "Sae all Ah hae tae gae on is how Ah've seen ye act. An' based on 'at, ye daenae care aboot anyane, nae even yer sae called friends."

"Don't you dare say that!" Astrid shouted at Merida, but the other girl remained unmoved.

"Why nae?" Merida questioned, "Ye've expressed naethin' but disdain fer Hiccup an' Fishlegs. Ye cannae seem tae stand bein' around Tuffnut an' Snotlout, despite hangin' oot with them all th' time. Ah

guess ye must feel saemethin' fer Ruff, probably saemethin' like a favorite pet, right?"

"How dare you!" Astrid shouted, pushing herself to her feet and grabbing Merida by her vest, ignoring the pain in her foot.

"Face it, Astrid," Merida spat, taking Astrid by the wrists and pulled the Viking girl's hands off of her, "Ye're a shallow, petty person, an' it's gaein' tae take a lot more than some half assed apology tae convince me ye're anythin' more than 'at."

With that, Merida turned and grabbed Angus' reins before she began to walk away. Astrid glared at her as she watched Merida leave. Her fists clenched and shaking in rage, Astrid began to lip after Merida.

"Get back here!" Astrid shouted at Merida as she chased after her, "Damnit, I said get back here!"

Merida continued walking, only stopping when she heard Astrid fall down behind her.

"Damnit!" Astrid screamed in frustration, sitting on the ground on her hands and knees, her eyes closed in annoyance and pain.

"Areâ€|Are ye okay?" Merida asked, concern leaking into her voice as she turned to look at the other girl.

"I'm fine," Astrid said dismissively, leaning back on her knees as she continued to glare at the ground, quickly wiping at the edges of her eyes to remove the tears forming there.

"Here," Merida said leaning down and offering Astrid her hand, "Let me help ye."

"Why would you want to help me?" Astrid questioned, not looking at Merida, "You hate me."

The words seemed to resonate inside Merida for a few moments before let out a sigh.

"Ah've ne'er been ane tae keep ma temper, Astrid," Merida sighed, "Ah think Ah've said some thin's jist now 'at Ah didnae really mean."

"I think you meant it plenty," Astrid replied, still looking down at her knees.

"Maybe a little," Merida admitted, kneeling on the ground with Astrid, "But Ah cud hae worded it better."

Astrid said nothing as she continued to look down at her knees.

"'At comment aboot ye an' Ruff was oot o' line," Merida continued, "Ah can tell from whit ye did taeday 'at ye care a lot about her."

"She'sâ€|She's my best friend," Astrid said quietly, a sad look crossing her face, "She's my only friend. You weren't far off the mark when you said I can't stand the others. For a long time I

couldn't. I still really can't when it comes to Snotlout and sometimes Tuffnut. Hiccup's growing on me though."

"An' Fishlegs?" Merida asked with a small grin.

"What about Fishlegs?" Astrid asked evasively, causing Merida's grin to grow slightly even though she let the point go. The two sat in silence for a few moments before Astrid sighed.

"I really am sorry," Astrid stated.

"Ah understand," Merida replied with a nod, "Jist as Ah'm sure ye understand why Ah'm nae quick tae fergive ye."

Astrid nodded in reply, her dark blue eyes falling again.

"Th' sad part is 'at on 'at first night Ah was here, 'at first time we met," Merida said sadly, "Ah really thought there was a chance we cud be friends."

"That's the worst part," Astrid agreed with a nod, "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately and I feel that, if things had been different, we really could have been friends."

Merida sighed sadly before a thoughtful look crossed her face.

"Maybe we still can," Merida stated.

"How so?" Astrid asked with a disbelieving laugh, "We've got a pretty bad history."

"Then let's get rid o' it," Merida said simply.

"What do you mean?" Astrid questioned, raising an eyebrow at Merida.

"We start over. Ferget all th' history," Merida explained, "We both seem tae think we cud be friends without our history, sae let's get rid o' it an' start fresh."

"Just like that?" Astrid questioned, crooking an eyebrow at Merida.

"Jist like 'at," Merida repeated with a nod, "Let's start with introductions."

Merida held out her hand for Astrid to shake.

"Merida O'Dunbroch," Merida stated, looking at Astrid expectantly. Astrid looked at the hand for a few moments before a small smile spread across her face.

"Astrid Hofferson," Astrid replied, grasping Merida's hand and shaking it firmly.

"Good tae meet ye, Astrid," Merida said with a smile of her own, standing up while still holding Astrid's hand, "Can Ah help ye up?"

"Sure," Astrid answered, holding Merida's hand as the other girl pulled her to her feet, "Thanks."

"Daenae mention it," Merida replied as she let go of Astrid's hand, "Ye need help gettin' home?"

"No," Astrid answered, shaking her head with a smile, "I think I'll walk."

With that, Astrid let go of Merida's hand before turning and starting to walk away. At first, she was limping badly and Merida was worried that Astrid was going to fall again. However, after Astrid paused to take a deep, calming breath, she visibly relaxed before continuing on. As Astrid walked, her gait seemed to return to normal, up to the point that if Merida couldn't see the bandage on the blonde's foot, she'd think the other girl wasn't injured at all.

"See ye taemorrow, Astrid!" Merida called to the other girl, a small smile on her face.

"See you tomorrow, Merida," Astrid replied, glancing over her shoulder and giving the redhead a small wave. As Astrid turned back to keep walking, she caught a glimpse of someone watching her from Gothi's hut. Turning to look, Astrid saw Gothi watching her with a smile on her face. Astrid returned the smile before continuing on, not watching as Gothi turned and made her way back into her home, picking up Astrid's discarded crutch as she went.

A/N: Boy this one really got away from me. I just kept finding more and more scenes that fit perfectly together that I just couldn't stop! I'm sure you guys don't mind though, everyone likes long chapters after all! I had a lot of fun with this chapter; I hope you guys liked it too! As always feedback and criticism is always welcome so please review! Later!

22. You Scratch My Back

****Chapter 22: You Scratch My Back****

After her talk with Astrid, Merida led Angus through the village to the smithy, where she knew she would find Hiccup and Fishlegs. Tying Angus to a post outside, Merida walked inside, finding Fishlegs and Hiccup chatting as the smaller boy was igniting the furnace.

"Soâ€¦it's dragon dung?" Hiccup questioned, a perplexed look on his face as he pushed down on the bellows.

"Pretty much, yeah," Fishlegs replied with a nod.

"Whit kind o' conversation did Ah jist walk intae?" Merida questioned, a perplexed look on her face as she closed the smithy door behind her.

"Fishlegs apparently ran into Hilde in the woods today," Hiccup explained as he moved away from the bellows, "Remember those black, exploding rocks from the cove?"

"Aye," Merida replied, still not understanding as she walked over to

one of the work benches and leaned against it.

"Well, turns out that is actually hardened dragon dung," Hiccup stated with a bemused smile on his face, "It burst into flame like that because of how their stomachs work and what they eat,"

There was a moment of silence as Merida simply stared at Hiccup, her mind digesting the information she had been given.

"'At's both fascinatin' an' disgustin' at th' same time," she finally said after a moment.

"That pretty much sums up my thoughts on the matter too," Hiccup replied with a snort of laughter, "Though I'm still interested in what they can do. Especially the way Hilde said they could be ground up into a powder."

"Whit are ye plannin', Hic?" Merida asked with a sly grin.

"About that? I don't know yet," Hiccup said as he walked over to his design desk and grabbed some sheets of parchment, "I have been drawing up some other ideas though."

Hiccup walked over to his work bench and laid one of the parchments down, allowing Merida and Fishlegs to look at it. On the parchment was drawn the rough sketch of what appeared to be a smaller version of the ballista that Hiccup had used to shoot down Toothless.

"What's that?" Fishlegs questioned, raising an eyebrow as he looked over the designs.

"It's an idea I've been working on," Hiccup explained, "A bow that holds the string for me like Merida suggested."

"It looks like th' ballista," Merida commented, "Except it's kind o' cross shaped."

"Yeah, I think it will work best that way," Hiccup elaborated, "I was thinking of calling it a crossbow."

"Ah like th' sound o' 'at," Merida stated with a smile.

"Thanks," Hiccup replied as he took the other parchment he had and laid it down in front of them. On it was the sketch of an oddly large saddle.

"Is that saddle for Toothless?" Fishlegs questioned.

"Yeah," Hiccup answered, "I learned after riding on Angus with Mer that it really helps to have a saddle to stay on what you want to ride's back, whether that'd be a horseâ€|"

"Or a dragon," Merida finished with a knowing grin.

"Exactly," Hiccup replied with a matching grin, "So, what do you guys say?"

Fishlegs and Merida looked at each other before smiling at Hiccup.

"Where do we start?" Fishlegs asked.

Later,

The next day, Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs made their way to the cove where Toothless was. Toothless seemed much more at ease as the three teens approached him, Fishlegs carrying another basket of fish while Merida and Hiccup carried the large leather saddle they had all made the night before. Seeing the saddle seemed to spook Toothless and before Fishlegs could offer up the fish, the Night Fury went sprinting away, forcing the teens to go chasing after him.

After a few minutes, they were able to catch Toothless and coax the Night Fury into allowing them to latch the saddle to his back as he ate the fish they had gotten for him. As they placed the saddle on Toothless, they also tied a long length of rope to the mechanical fin on the Night Fury's tail.

It took them a little bit more coaxing to get Toothless to allow Hiccup onto his newly saddled back, but as Hiccup pulled open the mechanical fin with the rope, a look of elation passed over Toothless' face.

"I think it's working!" Hiccup called, glancing over his shoulder at his friends before Toothless shot into the air with a flap of his wings, creating a gust of wind that forced Merida and Fishlegs to take a step back as their hair was blown back.

"Yeah," Fishlegs said with a smile as he readjusted his helmet, "I'd say it's working."

As Toothless and Hiccup flew over the surface of the lake, a look of elation passing over the young man's face. Seeing the rock wall of the cove approaching rapidly, Hiccup pulled on the rope to get Toothless to turn to the left. However, though the action got Toothless to turn, Hiccup's momentum continued to carry him forward, sending him squirming through the air as Toothless went spiraling down towards the surface of the lake, both of them crashing into the water with a splash.

"Well, ye figured oot th' saddle was important," Merida quipped as she and Fishlegs fished Hiccup out of the lake, "Now ye jist got tae learn how tae stay in it."

Later,

Standing in the smithy, Hiccup took the metal clip tied to the short length of tough rope and connecting it to the metal loop he and the others had built into the saddle. The other end had been attached to the thick leather belt he was wearing around his waist. He gave it a quick tug to test it before looking at Merida, who was sitting on the nearby workbench, smiling in satisfaction.

"'At ought tae keep ye in th' saddle," Merida commented with a grin.

"Hopefully," Hiccup replied before unhooking the rope from the saddle. As he did, he looked around the smithy in confusion.

"Where's Fishlegs?" he questioned with a raised eyebrow.

As if on cue, Fishlegs suddenly came bursting into the smithy, a large black rock in his hand, the dust from which covered his arm and his cheeks and a half crazed look in his eyes.

"Here's one of the rocks you wanted," Fishlegs stated as he put the rock down on the other work bench before pointing a blackened finger at Hiccup, "You are never allowed to ask where I found it or how I got it."

Merida and Hiccup shared a quick look before smiling nervously at Fishlegs.

"Uh, sure bud," Hiccup stated awkwardly, "Whatever you say. Thanks."

Fishlegs nodded before turning to walk away.

"I need a bath," he mumbled, closing the door behind him, leaving Hiccup and Merida to share a long, confused look in silence.

The next day,

Hiccup and Toothless flew around the cove, the harness Hiccup had created keeping him firmly in the saddle. He and the others had decided that it might be easier for Hiccup to control the tail fin if they tied the rope to Hiccup's foot. Giving it a tug, Hiccup sent the Night Fury higher. As they flew, Hiccup's foot accidentally slipped and he ended up accidentally sending Toothless flying back towards the ground where they came to a bumbling landing in a field of tall, yellowish grass.

"Hiccup!" Merida exclaimed as she and Fishlegs made their way up to the field where the boy and the dragon had landed. As they came over the ridge and made their way through the tall grass, they found Hiccup standing in a clearing, watching Toothless as the Night Fury rolled around in the grass that had been flattened by their landing, looking like he was having the time of his life.

"Whit's he daein'?" Merida questioned, a confused look on her face.

"Haven't the foggiest," Hiccup replied, still watching Toothless roll around in the grass.

"Seems like he really like this grass," Fishlegs commented as he reached down and picked up a handful of the plant, "It looks like sweetgrass. My mom likes to put it in her food."

"Might as well change its name tae dragonnip with th' way he's actin'," Merida commented, earning confused looks from the boys, "Ye know? Like catnip."

"What's catnip?" Hiccup questioned.

"'At's right, ye guys daenae really dae normal pets round here," Merida said with a sigh, "Catnip is a plant 'at has th' same effect on cats as this grass seems tae hae on Toothless."

"So, it affects all cats?" Fishlegs asked.

"As far as Ah know," Merida replied with a shrug.

"I wonder if this affects all dragons?" Fishlegs mused as he looked down at the grass in his hand.

Later,

That afternoon, Gobber had decided to give the teens another go at the Gronkle, which was currently angrily buzzing around the arena. As the other teens did their best to stay out of the way of the incensed dragon, Astrid stood next to Gobber and watched the others, her leg strong enough to stand and walk on but not healed enough yet to handle the rigors of running and jumping.

As the Gronkle swung low, it slammed head first into Snotlout, launching the young man into the air and sending him crashing to the arena floor, where he lay on his back and groaned in pain. Turning from Snotlout, the Gronkle's eyes narrowed as it saw Fishlegs. Growling angrily, the Gronkle began to charge at Fishlegs whose eyes widened in surprise.

"Fishlegs!" Astrid called out in alarm, "Look out!"

Thinking quickly, Fishlegs reached into his pocket and pulled out the handful of sweetgrass he had taken from earlier. As the Gronkle lowered its head to ram into him, Fishlegs held the grass out in front of him as he squeezed his eyes closed. When the Gronkle got close enough, it took an unintentional sniff of the air. Catching wind of the grass, the Gronkle's eyes went wide as it buzzed to a stop, slumping against the ground as it pressed its nose to the grass in Fishlegs' hand. Opening his eyes, Fishlegs couldn't help but smile at the Gronkle's reaction and began to rub the grass on the dragon's nose, eliciting a purr of contentment from the creature.

Looking around, Fishlegs found everyone staring astonished at him, except for Hiccup and Merida, who had grins on their faces.

"Fishlegs," Astrid said as she and the others walked over, looking at the Gronkle in surprise as it continued to lie purring on the ground, "How did you do that?"

"Well, you guys remember the effect the eel had on the Zippleback?" Fishlegs questioned, earning nods from the others, "I figured if there were smells dragons don't like, maybe there were ones they do."

"Guess you were right," Astrid stated, glancing at the Gronkle with a smirk, "Why sweetgrass?"

"There was a bunch at my house and it's called sweetgrass for a reason, right?" Fishlegs lied with a shrug, "I figured it was worth a shot."

"You're something else, Fishlegs," Astrid said with a smile and a shake of her head. Smiling, Fishlegs looked over at Hiccup and Merida who shared a conspiratorial grin with him.

_The next day, _

Merida sat on a rock in the cove, looking bored as she watched Hiccup taking measurements of Toothless and doing calculations in his head. Sighing, she took one of the arrows and began to play with it idly, looking at the designs on the arrowhead. As she twirled the arrow in her hand, the rays of the midday sun reflected off the metal arrowhead, creating a spot of bright light on the ground.

Glancing over, Toothless spotted the light on the ground, causing his eyes to go wide and his ears to prick up. Leaping to his feet, Toothless knocked Hiccup to the side as he tried to leap onto the light. A look of surprise crossed Merida's face as she looked at the Night Fury in front of her, her expression turning to one of bemusement as Toothless looked at the light in confusion, seemingly not understanding why he couldn't pin the light under his paws.

Turning the arrowhead slightly, Merida caused the spot of light to jump to the side. Toothless whipped his head around to follow the spot of light, which Merida was making dance across the ground. Toothless lunged at the spot of light, but Merida made sure it was always just out of the Night Fury's reach. Merida giggled to herself as she watched Toothless spin in circles in his vain attempt to capture the speck of light, Hiccup and Fishlegs watching with bemused expressions.

Later,

"Now, taeday," Gobber addressed the teenagers from his position near one of the large wooden doors in the arena, "Ye'll be dealin' with th' Terrible Terror."

As he spoke, he pulled on the release lever for the door, only for a dragon no bigger than a cat crawled out of a small swinging door built into the larger door. It was light green in color with a white underbelly and yellowish green, bat-like wings. Its bulging yellow eyes looked around wildly, its tail wagging behind it, the red ridges on its back swaying with every movement. It looked up at the teens and squeaked, showing its toothless mouth.

"Are you kidding!?" Tuffnut laughed as he pointed his spear at the Terror, "It's smaller than my-"

Tuffnut was interrupted when the Terror let out a screech and leapt at the young man latching onto Tuffnut's nose with its beak-like mouth and scratching at his face with its red claws. The others watched with mixtures of surprise and amusement as the tiny dragon tried to maul Tuffnut, who screamed rather pathetically as he tried to get the creature off.

An idea coming to her, Merida drew an arrow out of her quiver before angling it so the arrowhead caught the light of the sun, creating a spot of bright light that quickly caught the Terror's attention. Jumping off Tuffnut's face and allowing the blonde boy to roll away, the Terror chased after the light as Merida directed it back towards the small door it had come through. Aiming the light at the door, Merida tricked the Terror into jumping at it, sending the dragon tumbling back into its cage, which Hiccup quickly sealed behind

it.

Turning, Merida smiled at the teens who were gawking at her.

"Ah used tae dae 'at tae th' cats in th' castle back home all th' time," Merida explained with a chuckle, "Works like a charm."

The others laughed at what had just happened as Merida, Hiccup and Fishlegs shared a look.

The next day,

"Taeday," Gobber's voice boomed off of the surrounding stonework of the arena, "Ye will be facin' ane o' th' most fearsome dragons 'at we know o'."

The seven teenagers stood in the center of the arena as usual, each with weapons drawn and those who could had shields at the ready. Astrid stood near the center, the bandages on her foot were gone but it was clear that she still favored her uninjured side. Glancing up, she saw Gothi watching them along with a handful of other villagers milling about in the stands above. As Astrid caught the elders eye Gothi smiled gently at her, causing the young girl to smile back.

"Why are all these people here?" Snotlout asked as he looked at the villagers in the stands, which included a large number of children watching with wide, excited eyes, "We're just training."

"Gobber runs a pretty intense dragon training class," Astrid replied with a shrug, "I mean I don't think I've ever heard of other trainers using dragons like he has and how often do you get to see someone fight a dragon without worrying about running for your life? What would you rather do, chop wood or watch us fight a dragon?"

"Fair enough," Snotlout replied with a smirk and a nod.

As Fishlegs' eyes drifted through the crowd they came to a sudden stop as they fell on someone who made his face pale and his pupils to go wide.

"Oh no," he muttered, frozen stock still.

"What is it?" Hiccup questioned as he and Merida followed his gaze.

"It's my mom," Fishlegs answered as they caught sight of Ribbon Ingerman standing by the wall separating the wall separating the arena from the stands, elbowing two villagers out of the way before hanging over the wall and waving enthusiastically at Fishlegs.

"Fishlegs!" Ribbon called, an enthusiastic smile on her face, "Up here! Hi!"

"Hi Mom," Fishlegs replied weakly, giving her a small wave and a half-hearted smile, his face reddening from embarrassment. Snotlout and the twins let out small laughs and Astrid shot him a smile that was a mixture of amusement and sympathy. Hiccup chuckled as he patted Fishlegs on the shoulder, while Merida looked on with an expression

that suggested she found the whole affair adorable.

"I came to watch you and your friends fight the dragon!" Ribbon continued, oblivious to her son's embarrassment as she turned her attention towards Hiccup, "Hi Hiccup!"

"Hi, Mrs. Ingerman," Hiccup replied politely as he waved back, "It's good to see you again."

"Good mornin', Mrs. Ingerman," Merida greeted the older woman happily, causing the woman to jump in surprise.

"Oh, hello Princess!" Ribbon replied breathlessly as she quickly adjusted her straw blonde hair to appear more presentable, "I hope you are having a good morning as well."

"Ah ne'er did get tae thank ye fer ma new clothes," Merida stated as she grabbed her vest and held it open, showing the clothes that Ribbon had made for her.

"Oh, it was no trouble at all, Princess," Ribbon replied, blushing under the praise, "Do you like them?"

"Ah love them," Merida replied, doing a quick twirl that caused Hiccup to chuckle while Astrid to smirk and roll her eyes, "Thank ye again."

"Really, it was my pleasure," Ribbon replied giddily before turning her attention back to Fishlegs, "Sweetie, I'm going to go sit down now. Good luck!"

"Thanks Mom," Fishlegs replied, giving a halfhearted wave before sighing as Ribbon turned away.

"She seemsâ€¦" Merida trailed off as she playfully pondered the word she wanted to use "Enthusiastic."

"That's my mom," Fishlegs answered with a sigh and a smile, "You like teasing her? She'll never get over the fact that a princess talked to her."

"A wee bit," Merida replied jovially, holding her thumb and pointer finger close together to emphasis her point.

"I thought you hated all of that princess stuff," Hiccup commented.

"It comes in handy saemetimes," Merida replied with a smirk and a shrug.

Gobber loudly cleared his voice to bring everyone's attention back to him.

"Alright, if everyane is done chattin'," he said, pausing to give Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs a pointed look which earned sheepish grins in reply, "We can get started."

"Now, though this dragon might nae be on th' same level as th' Red Death, a Night Fury or even a Monstrous Nightmare, believe me when Ah say 'at a Timberjack is a force tae be reckoned with," Gobber stated

solemnly, causing some of his students to fidget nervously, "Bigger than even a Nightmare or a Zippleback, th' Timberjack can breathe fire sae hot it cud melt th' armor o' a Southerner Night an' cook him inside. Its teeth are sharp an' many an' it can squeeze a man sae tight his spine will snap like a twig. Whit it lacks in claws in makes up fer with its wings, which are sharper than anythin' Ah cud ever hope tae make an' can cut down a tree in a single swipe."

"Ye lot are gaein' tae need tae use everythin' Ah've taught ye sae far if any an' all o' ye hope tae best this beast," Gobber continued as he walked over to one of the larger doors, behind which the teens could hear the sound of metal scraping against stone, and placed his good hand on the release lever, "Are ye all ready?"

The teens glanced at one another, nodding at each other before giving a collective nod towards Gobber.

"Alright," Gobber stated as he pulled down on the release lever, the heavy iron bolt holding the door shut sliding to the side, "Good luck."

As soon as Gobber's words left his lips, the door smashed open and a dragon leapt through like it had been launched. The Timberjack was indeed a massive dragon, its grayish-green serpentine body half again as long as a Monstrous Nightmare. Its crocodilian jaw opened wide as it let out a cacophonous roar, its cavernous jaw lined with sharp, bone white teeth. Landing a few feet in front of the teens, the Timberjack coiled its body like a snake, somehow not cutting itself on the steel grey spines that covered its tail or the similarly colored ridges that ran down its back. Rearing up, it spread its truly colossal steel grey wings fully, its wingspan twice the length of the dragon itself, the appendages combining with the sweeping horns on the back of the Timberjack's head to create a monstrous shadow that enveloped the teens. The hooks that grew from the bottom and top of its wings gleamed in the sunlight as the Timberjack observed the teens with angry black on yellow eyes. Opening its mouth again, the dragon released another thunderous roar that seemed to shake the arena around them as a burning light grew in the back of its throat.

"Scatter!" Astrid shouted, causing the teens to all run in separate directions as the Timberjack fired a burning ball of fire that exploded when it hit the ground, scorching the stones that the teens had been standing on.

"Did you see the size of that blast!? Snotlout asked no in particular, watching as the Timberjack watched the teenagers surround it with angry eyes, "What are our shields supposed to do against that!?"

"Not much, I'm guessing," Hiccup commented sardonically.

"Still, shields are good for more thanâ€|well shielding," Fishlegs commented before he began banging on the side of his shield, the sound causing the Timberjack to growl irritably. Quickly, the others with shields joined in, the multisided sonic attack causing the Timberjack to screech in pain and anger. A second later, the Timberjack spread its wings wide and began slashing around it, the tips of its sharp wings cutting into the surrounding stonework and sending sparks flying as they scraped along the hard rock. The teens

were forced to duck and tumble out of the way, ending their attempt to disorient the Timberjack.

"Well, that didn't exactly work," Tuffnut grouched as the Timberjack recollected itself, "Now what?"

"Now we try not to get eaten!" Astrid cried as the Timberjack lunged at Ruffnut, forcing the Viking girl to tumble out of the way as the dragon went slithering past. Spinning around next to the arena wall, the Timberjack raised itself before spitting another fireball, forcing Merida to roll out of the way as it slammed into the wall behind her in a cloud of smoke and fire.

"Fishlegs!" Merida called as she picked herself up, "How many shots daes a Timberjack hae!?"

"Eight!" Fishlegs replied as the Timberjack let out another bellowing roar.

"Eight!?" Ruffnut shouted incredulously "You've got to be kidding me!"

"He's not," Astrid spoke up, watching the Timberjack wearily, "It's got six shots left, though I'm pretty sure that's the least of our problems."

As she said that, the Timberjack screeched and spread its wings before slithering across the ground, its appendages set to cleave them all in two.

"Down!" Hiccup shouted, prompting everyone to jump onto their bellies, allowing the bladed wings to pass harmlessly above them. The Timberjack snapped its jaws at Snotlout as it passed, forcing the young man to tumble out of the way.

Merida quickly pushed herself back to her feet, spinning to face the Timberjack as it reached the edge of the arena and turned back to face them, curling up like a cobra again. Notching an arrow, she pulled the strike back and fired it, but the missile merely bounced off the Timberjack's thick scales, causing it to growl at her.

"Ah thick its scales are too thick fer our weapons!" Merida cried, "Whit dae we dae?"

"It has to have a weak spot somewhere," Astrid muttered before she saw the Timberjack begin to charge at Merida the gigantic dragon taking up so much space that the Highlander had nowhere to dodge to.

"Merida!" Astrid shouted as she ran towards the other girl, tossing her shield and axe to the side as she went, ignoring the pain in her leg. Before Merida had had time to so much as scream at the approaching dragon, Astrid was by her side and grabbing Merida by the waist.

"Whit are ye-" Merida began to say but was interrupted as Astrid lifted her completely off the ground, stunning the princess into silence.

"Hiccup! Catch!" Astrid shouted before throwing Merida into the air

and clear of the dragon. Astrid had just enough time to turn towards the Timberjack as it barreled towards her, while Merida let out a surprised shriek as she flew through the air.

Hiccup quickly dropped his sword and shield before squaring up to catch Merida. Instead, Merida smashed into him and they both went tumbling to the ground. Hiccup groaned as he sat up with Merida sitting in his lap.

"Are you okay!?" they asked each other in unison before a gasp from the gathered crowd caused them to turn back to where Astrid had been standing a moment ago. To their astonishment, Astrid was now in the jaws of the Timberjack, her feet planted firmly on its lower jaw as she held onto two of its teeth with her hands, pushing upwards to keep the dragon from crushing her. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, sweat forming on her forehead and her arms shaking from exertion. The Timberjack growled in annoyance as it continued trying to bite down, but Astrid refused to budge an inch.

"Sun above," Merida whispered in shock, her ice blue eyes wide as she turned to Hiccup, "Did ye know she cud dae 'at?"

"I knew Astrid was stronger than she looked butâ€¦" Hiccup trailed off, shaking his head slowly as his mouth hung open in shock, "I've never seen her do anything like this before."

As the others looked on in surprise, the Timberjack grew tired of struggling with Astrid. The blonde's eyes widened in fear as she saw a fiery red light forming down the dragon's throat.

"Damn," she swore quietly as she tried to figure a way to get out of the situation.

"Gods be good," Gobber said to himself as he hobbled towards Astrid and the Timberjack as fast as he could, "Astrid get oot o' there!"

Astrid was desperately trying to get out, but every time she tried to move, the Timberjack tried to slam its jaws closed on her. Panic began to set in as the Timberjack prepared to shoot Astrid pointblank with its fireball.

"Hold on, Astrid!" Fishlegs bellowed as he came barreling towards her from the side. Just as the Timberjack launched its fireball at her, Fishlegs leapt into the air and tackled Astrid, knocking her to the side as the dragon's jaw slammed shut onto the fireball, causing it to burst in the beast's mouth, tongues of flame licking the air between its teeth as the fire seared the soft flesh of its tongues and gums. Astrid and Fishlegs went tumbling across the stone arena floor, the Viking girl held securely in the young man's arms. Fishlegs hissed as they rolled to a stop, his back against the hard stone as Astrid lay on his chest.

"Are you alright!?" Astrid asked with concern, her voice almost drowned out as the Timberjack bellowed in pain, black smoke rising from its maw.

"My leg," Fishlegs groaned, prompting Astrid to look at the appendage in question. The lower half of Fishlegs' right pant leg was burnt off, the flesh underneath an angry shade of red.

"It looks like you got burnt a little," Astrid explained, giving Fishlegs' chest a comforting pat before rolling off, "Nothing we can't-"

"Astrid! Look out!" Ruffnut cried from the other side of the arena, prompting the blonde to turn and see the Timberjack rearing back to strike at her and Fishlegs.

"Hold on!" Astrid cried as she reached down and grabbed Fishlegs by his tunic. Doing a quick spin, she dragged Fishlegs across the ground before heaving him to the side, sending the young man rolling across the stone floor, clear of the dragon. Glancing over her shoulder, Astrid saw the Timberjack barreling towards her. Leaping to the side, she rolled out of the way of the Timberjack's jaws and ducked under its razor wings. Rolling to her feet, Astrid watched as the Timberjack turned to face her with narrowed dark blue eyes.

"Alright," she said determinedly, "My turn."

As the Timberjack lowered its head and growled threateningly at Astrid, the blonde girl ran at it, armed with nothing but her fists. Lashing out at her with one of its wings, the tips creating sparks as they dragged against the stone floor, the Timberjack tried to slice Astrid to pieces. Astrid quickly rolled under the attack, before sliding under the Timberjack's other wing as it tried a follow up attack. As Astrid ran right at the Timberjack's face, it tried to bite at her. Leaping into the air, Astrid flipped over the Timberjack's mouth and landed on its head, grabbing one of the dragon's horns for balance.

"Astrid!" Ruffnut shouted as she picked up the girl's waraxe and tossed it towards her, "Catch!"

Astrid easily snagged the axe out of the air, stepping onto the center of the Timberjack's head as she spun the axe so she was holding it above her own. With a cry, she brought it down hard on the Timberjack's head. There was a loud clang as steel met scale, causing sparks to shoot up as the axe bounced off the scales, causing Astrid to lose her balance. As Astrid pinwheeled her arms, the Timberjack roared in anger and pain, the strike seeming to have hurt the dragon even though it didn't penetrate the skin.

Throwing its head back, the Timberjack completely dislodged Astrid, sending her tumbling into the air. Spinning through the air, Astrid managed to right herself as she fell towards the Timberjack's back. As she landed on her feet, she began to slide down the Timberjack's green-grey scales, using her free hand to dig into the dragon's scales in an effort to slow herself down. As she passed between the Timberjack's wings, her hand still digging into the dragon's back, the creature suddenly shuddered and fell to the ground with a thud. The sudden movement sent Astrid flipping into the air again, landing next to the Timberjack and stumbling as she caught herself.

Confusion written on her face, Astrid turned and looked at the Timberjack. The dragon was laying on the ground, its eyes closed in a look of utter happiness and contentedness. The other teens and Gobber looked at the Timberjack in confusion and surprise, as did the people

in the stands.

"What did you do?" Hiccup asked in surprise. Astrid could only shrug in reply, clearly as baffled as everyone else. As the Timberjack began to stir, a thought occurred to Astrid as she looked at her hand then back at the dragon. Reaching up as far as she could, Astrid began to scratch the area between the Timberjack's wings. As she did, the Timberjack let out what sounded like a moan as it relax even further, its body sagging against the stone floor.

"Well," Gobber spoke up after a long moment of quiet from everyone in the arena, "'At's new."

"Seems like we find out something weird about dragons every other day now," Snotlout observed as they crowded around the Timberjack. Looking over, Astrid saw Hiccup and Merida trying to help Fishlegs to his feet, but the blonde was having a hard time putting weight on his injured leg and the other two were finding it difficult to lift the larger boy on their own.

"Hey!" Astrid called as she jogged over to their side, and reached for Fishlegs' arm, "Here, let me help."

Pulling on Fishlegs' arm, Astrid easily pulled Fishlegs' to his feet, draping his arm over her shoulders to support him.

"How did ye dae 'at?" Merida asked, astonished, "'At an' whit ye did in against th' Timberjack."

"I don't know, I just do," Astrid replied with a shrug, almost knocking Fishlegs over but quickly catching him, "I've always been stronger than I look. Myâ€|my dad was the same way."

A silence fell over the group before Hiccup awkwardly cleared his throat.

"Uh, yeah, that was pretty impressive today, Astrid," Hiccup complimented her.

"Thanks," Astrid replied genuinely, "We've all been doing pretty good, haven't we? I really have no idea who Gothi's going to pick."

"We'll have to wait and see I guess," Fishlegs stated.

"I guess so," Astrid agreed before she began to lead Fishlegs towards the arena exit, "Come on Fish, let's go get you patched up."

"Alright," Fishlegs replied as he began limping along with Astrid, giving Hiccup and Merida a quick wave, "I'll see you guys later."

"Later," Merida and Hiccup said together, returning the wave. As they watched the two blondes go, a smile spread across Merida's face.

"What are you smiling at?" Hiccup asked as he crooked an eyebrow at her.

"Ah daenae know," Merida replied with a shrug as she turned to face him, "Call it woman's intuition."

Reaching out, she took Hiccup's hand and began to lead him towards the exit.

"Now, come on," she stated, looking at Hiccup with half-lidded eyes, "Ah'm sensin' an opportune moment tae hae some alone time."

Hiccup could only smile nervously as a blush spread across his face, allowing Merida to take him wherever she wanted to go.

At the gate, Ribbon stood with Gothi, looking anxious as she watched Astrid and Fishlegs approach.

"Oh Fishlegs, sweetie, are you okay?" Ribbon asked as she began to fuss over him.

"I'm fine, Mom. Just got a little burnt is all. Occupational hazard" Fishlegs said as he tried to wave her away, an embarrassed look on his face. Astrid could only smile at the spectacle.

Leaning down, Gothi examined the bright red skin on Fishlegs' leg.

"Yes, it's just a minor burn," Gothi said with a sagely nod, "Some burn ointment and a good night's sleep and you'll be right as rain."

"See," Fishlegs said to Ribbon as they began to make their way to Gothi's hut, the elder leading the way, "Nothing to worry about."

"I'm a mother, Fishlegs. I'm allowed to worry," Ribbon replied before turning her attention to Astrid, "Thank you so much for helping him, Astrid."

"It's no big deal," Astrid waved the compliment off, "It's the least I could do. Fishlegs saved my life in the arena today. Plus, when my leg got injured, he's the one who got me free and he even carried me once when I was having trouble moving around."

"Oh, did he now?" Ribbon asked with a raised eyebrow, noticing the blush that covered her sons face as well as the small one coloring Astrid's cheeks, "Well, he is such a good boy, isn't he, Astrid?"

"Mooooom!" Fishlegs groaned in embarrassment, hanging his head to try and hide. Astrid could only laugh in reply.

A/N: This chapter took forever! Seemed like it just didn't want to be written. I guess it probably had to do with the montage nature of this chapter. Oh well, I think in the end it turned out really well. I had a blast playing around with the Timberjack as the fact that we've seen so little of them in the series meant I could add some of my own interpretation to the mix. Hope you guys liked it too! As always, critiques and feedback are always welcome so please review! Later!

23. Music Tames the Savage Beast

Chapter 23: Music Tames the Savage Beast

The sun shone brightly down upon the cliff near the cove where Toothless stayed. Hiccup was currently on Toothless' back, a rope connected to the Night Fury's saddle and tied to a stake the teens had driven into the ground. Hiccup had figured it might work better to get the basics of flying down in a way that didn't result in quite so many crash landings. Hopping into the air, Toothless spread his wings, catching the draft of the sea breeze and hovering in the air, held in place by the rope. Merida and Fishlegs sat on either side of the stake, idly watching as Hiccup swung Toothless back and forth, getting a feel for the new equipment he had installed.

Having grown sick of trying to finagle the rope into pulling the mechanical fin the way he wanted to, Hiccup had spent the night building a pair of stirrups for Toothless' saddle. The stirrup on the side of the mechanical fin had a pedal built into it that could be moved up and down, which, using a small system of ropes and pulleys, would adjust the fin accordingly. In all cases, it seemed to be working perfectly.

Merida smiled as she looked up at Hiccup riding on Toothless. With the wind sweeping through his auburn hair, his pale green eyes narrowed in determination and a confident, almost cocky grin on his face, Merida felt she was seeing a completely new side of Hiccup, one she was sure she liked just as much as the others.

Smiling softly, Merida pulled a whittling knife out of her belt before she began to carve something into the unoccupied space on her bow. Fishlegs noticed her work and raised an eyebrow.

"What are you doing?" he asked, curiously.

"Ah think Ah've finally settled on a name fer ma bow," Merida explained as she finished carving, blowing on the area she had been whittling to remove the shavings before handing it to Fishlegs for him to examine. Turning the bow over so he could see what Merida had done, he found, just under the symbol of her kingdom, what appeared to be a word written in a language he didn't recognize.

"I don't recognize the script," Fishlegs said as he looked up at Merida.

"It's Gaelic," Merida explained, "It was th' language o' th' Highlands afore th' Old Empire came an' brought th' Common Tongue with them."

"What does it say?" Fishlegs questioned.

"Sealgair," Merida answered, sounding like she was born to speak the tongue "It means hunter. Ah found it fittin' fer saeme reason."

"More fitting than you know," Fishlegs muttered, a pensive look on his face as he handed Merida the bow back. Merida looked at him in confusion.

"Whit did ye say?" Merida questioned.

"Oh nothing," Fishlegs replied quickly surprised Merida had heard him, "Was just, uh, figuring both you and Hiccup have names for your weapons, maybe I should name my hammer or something."

Fishlegs pulled out his old, one-handed warhammer and showed her in an effort to change the subject. Merida smiled at the thought.

"Whit are ye thinkin' o' namin' it?" Merida asked.

"I don't know, something cool," Fishlegs replied, now genuinely giving the matter some thought, "Like after the first jarl or something like that."

"Ah'm nae really familiar with th' jarls," Merida admitted, "Whit was his name?"

"Siegfried," Fishlegs replied, "The legends called him Siegfried the Great and Siegfried the First. Lord of All Vikings and King of the Wilderwest. It was he that united all the Viking tribes. They even say that he did battle with the Red Death and won."

"Ah thought th' Red Death killed th' jarl?" Merida questioned.

"No," Fishlegs replied, shaking his head, "That was his grandson, Gunnarr, the Ghastly who they also called the Grimbeard."

"Sae th' line o' jarls ended jist like 'at?" Merida asked, surprised.

"Oh no, not like that," Fishlegs explained, "Gunnarr had three sons, Torgeir the Thugheart, Claus the Chucklehead and Hiccup."

"Hiccup?" Merida questioned as she raised an eyebrow in surprise, "As in Hiccup Horrendous Haddock?"

"The First," Fishlegs finished with a chuckle.

"Sae, is he Hiccup's ancestor?" Merida asked, surprised.

"A relative. His great-great-uncle I believe," Fishlegs elaborated, "Hiccup is descended from Claus."

"Then why daes he carry th' name?" Merida inquired.

"Well, Hiccup the First left no sons," Fishlegs explained, "So Claus decided to name his son after his brother to carry on his legacy."

"Whit happened tae Hiccup th' First?" Merida questioned, becoming more and more intrigued as they talked.

"Nobody really knows," Fishlegs admitted with a shrug, "All we know is that he died young without fathering any children."

"Sae th' royal family's last name was Haddock?" Merida asked.

"No," Fishlegs answered with a shake of his head, "I'm not sure the jarls had a family name. I'm pretty sure they used the old way of your last name indicating who you were the son or daughter of."

"Sae where daes th' name Haddock come from?" Merida questioned.

"That was a title given to Hiccup along with Horrendous," Fishlegs elaborated, "They called him Horrendous because of the great fighter he was. They called him Haddock because he was such a great swimmer, people swore that he could breathe underwater. Claus took the titles and made it all one name, which is where the naming conventions of our tribe come from."

"Whit about Hiccup?" Merida asked, "Seems like a strange name compared tae th' rest o' his family. Why did his parents name him 'at?"

"Because he was small," Hiccup suddenly said. Whipping her head around, Merida saw Hiccup looking down at her from Toothless' back, an unreadable look on his face.

"Whit?" Merida asked in surprise.

"They named him Hiccup because he was so small when he was born," Hiccup explained, leaning his arms against Toothless' back, "According to the legends, he didn't really get much bigger as he grew up."

"Is 'atâ€|" Merida began to ask but trailed off.

"Why my dad named me Hiccup?" Hiccup finished for her, a sad look in his eyes, "Partially. He probably also hoped I'd live up to the legacy of the first two Hiccups. After all, they were both great warriors and Hiccup the Second, my grandfather, was as big as my dad. Or at least, he was supposed to have been. I never met him. He died in battle before I was born."

"Ah'm sure ye'll live up tae th' legacy, Hiccup," Merida stated with a smile, before an annoyed look crossed her face, "Why didnae ye tell me ye were royalty?"

"Because I'm not," Hiccup replied with a snort, "I'm descended from the second son of someone who ruled a kingdom that doesn't even exist anymore. I never have been nor will I ever be royalty. I'll be lucky to be chief."

"Ye ne'er know," Merida said with a shrug, "Th' Highland Kingdoms anly reformed when Ah was a babe. Things can always change."

"So, what?" Hiccup asked with a chuckle, "You think I could be a jarl?"

"Like Ah said," Merida replied sincerely, a warm smile on her face, "Ah think ye can live up tae th' legacy."

Hiccup blushed under the praise, his eyes wide with surprise. As he opened his mouth to say something, a sudden gust of wind came shooting off the sea. Catching Toothless off guard, the gust blew against the Night Fury's half open wings, knocking him and Hiccup airborne, kept from flying away only by the rope secured to the ground. As Fishlegs and Merida tried to hold their ground against the gale, the rope frayed and then broke, sending Hiccup and Toothless

flying back into the woods with a crash.

"Hiccup!" Merida exclaimed frightfully as she and Fishlegs hurried after Toothless and his rider. They found them a short distance away, trying to disentangle themselves from a bush and each other.

"Are you guys okay!?" Fishlegs asked in a worried tone as he and Merida ran up to Hiccup and Toothless.

"Yeah, I think so," Hiccup groaned as Toothless picked himself up, the rope that attached the two causing the Night Fury to lift his rider into the air. Grumbling, Hiccup righted himself, setting his feet on the ground as he tried to unclip himself from Toothless' saddle, only for the clip to refuse to budge. His eyes narrowing in confusion, Hiccup tried again, to no avail. Trying to remove his harness, he found that held fast as well.

"Uh, guys," Hiccup said in a worried tone, "I think we've got a problem."

"What's wrong?" Fishlegs questioned.

"I can't unhook from the saddle and my harness is stuck too," Hiccup explained.

"Whit shud we dae?" Merida questioned.

"I can fix it with my toolsâ€¦" Hiccup trailed off.

"Which are in the smithy," Fishlegs finished with a sigh.

"Alright," Merida stated with a nod, "'at's nae big deal. Me an' Fishlegs will jist gae get them fer ye."

"It's getting dark," Hiccup commented as he glanced up at the sky, "I should come with you guys."

"You sure it's a good idea to bring Toothless that close to the village?" Fishlegs asked, glancing at the Night Fury that was sitting and following the conversation.

"It will be fine, I can keep him under control," Hiccup replied, earning dubious expressions from Merida and Fishlegs.

"Alright, well we better get movin'," Merida said as she turned to go, "We're wastin' daylight as it is."

With that, the three teenagers and the dragon began making their way from the cliff and into the forest back towards the village.

Dusk had fallen by the time the foursome had reached the outskirts of the village. Torches burned here and there and they could make out the shadows of sentries moving amongst the buildings or watching from the watch towers, their eyes open for any sign of trouble.

"Alright, Hic," Merida said as she turned to look at the other two, "Me an' Fishlegs will gae down tae th' smithy an' grab yer tools. Ye wait here with Toothless an' we'll bring th' tools back here then ye can get yerself free."

"Sounds good," Hiccup said with a nod, giving Toothless a scratch on the next that caused the Night Fury to purr in appreciation.

"Come on, Fish," Merida said to the larger boy, who nodded and followed her as she made her way into the village.

"Now, jist act natural," Merida stated as the two fell into step beside one another, "We're supposed tae be here."

"Right," Fishlegs said nervously, glancing around in a suspicious fashion, "Act natural."

Merida rolled her eyes, but didn't comment as they continued walking.

"Sae, Ah've been meanin' tae ask ye saemethin'," Merida said, a sly grin on her face.

"What's that?" Fishlegs asked, crooking an eyebrow at Merida.

"Ah was jist wonderin' whit exactly is gaein' on between ye an' Astrid?" Merida questioned, her smile growing as she saw Fishlegs jump in surprise as a blush began to form on his face.

"W-What are you talking about?" Fishlegs asked nervously as he began to scratch the side of his face, "There's nothing going on between us."

"Right," Merida replied, clearly not believing him, "Seriously, tell me."

"There's nothing to tell," Fishlegs insisted as he looked away from her.

"Come on, Fishlegs," Merida persisted, crossing her arms over her chest and narrowing her eyes at the Viking boy, "Ah know saemethin' is going on. Why wonae ye tell me? Ah thought we were friends."

"We are friends," Fishlegs said quickly, hoping to placate the Highlander girl, "I just don't really understand what's going on myself."

"Well then tell me whit ye dae know an' maybe Ah can explain it tae ye," Merida stated, smiling as she placed a hand to her chest, "Ah am a girl after all."

"Well, it's just, ever since we started dragon training, Astrid's been actingâ€¦I don't know, different around me," Fishlegs explained, playing nervously with his hands as he did.

"How sae?" Merida asked as they neared the smithy.

"Well, when I was hanging out with Snotlout and Tuffnut, we hung out with Astrid and Ruffnut from time to time," Fishlegs explained, "She never really talked to me much and so I always figured she didn't really like me."

"I got that impression from a lot of people, actually," Fishlegs said with a sad sigh, causing Merida to place a sympathetic hand on his shoulder and smile warmly at him.

"Sae whit changed?" Merida questioned, hoping for a happier topic.

"I don't really know, to be honest," Fishlegs answered with a shrug, "I mean I guess it started when I fought with that Gronkle in the arena. She's never complimented me or anything like that before."

"Ye must hae impressed her," Merida surmised, "She probably likes big, strong, brave Viking men."

"I don't think that's the whole thing though," Fishlegs continued, "That night we had that talk, which I guess I can tell you now was about her wanting to apologize to you, she said she had always thought I spoke well. I guess she thought I was smarter than Snotlout and Tuffnut and liked that."

"Daenae take much tae be smarter than Tuff an' Snotface," Merida commented with a chuckle.

"True enough, but still, I was surprised when she said that to me," Fishlegs stated, "She also said she liked that I didn't hit on her all the time, unlike Snotlout."

"Again, saemethin' any girl would appreciate," Merida replied with a snort, "Whit did ye say tae 'at?"

"I told her I never did because I thought I would never have a chance with someone like her," Fishlegs answered

"Aw, Fish, daenae sell yerself-" Merida began to say but stopped when Fishlegs kept talking.

"To which she said that I did have a chance," Fishlegs finished, his face heating up at the memory.

"Did she now?" Merida questioned, raising both her eyebrows in surprise.

"Yeah, and ever since then, she's been acting really different," Fishlegs went on, "I mean she helped me when I got injured and she even seemed concerned about it."

"Well, ye were also th' ane who got her oot from under 'at wall, daenae ferget," Merida stated, "An' saved her from bein' eaten by 'at Timberjack. She's probably pretty thankful fer 'at."

"But it's more than that," Fishlegs insisted as they approached the smithy, "Twice now Astrid has asked me for help. Before that, I had never seen Astrid ask anyone for help with anything."

"People change," Merida replied with a shrug as she stopped outside the smithy door, "An' saemetimes they change fer th' better."

"I guess," Fishlegs said with a shrug as he came to a stop next to Merida. The princess looked at him for a moment, a sly grin growing on her face.

"Dae ye like Astrid, Fishlegs?" Merida questioned.

"Iâ€¦I don't knowâ€¦" Fishlegs replied, playing with his fingers even more, "I meanâ€¦she's prettyâ€¦n-not that I only care if girls are pretty mind you! S-She's smart and she's probably the toughest fighter we have. Plusâ€¦"

"Plusâ€¦" Merida urged.

"Plus she's been reallyâ€¦nice to me lately," Fishlegs continued, "I mean, after Gothi fixed my leg, my mom invited her to dinnerâ€¦and she went! She seemed to enjoy it even!"

"Well Fishlegs, Ah think 'at's because she likes ye," Merida said with a laugh.

"Youâ€¦You really think so?" Fishlegs questioned uncertainly.

"Ah do," Merida replied simply as she opened the door and stepped into the smithy, Fishlegs following her, "She's probably too stubborn tae admit it, even tae herself, but Ah definitely think she likes ye. An' Ah'm pretty sure ye like her too."

"What should I do?" Fishlegs asked quietly, inspecting one of Gobber's tools on his workbench so he didn't have to look Merida in the eye.

"'At Ah cannae really help ye with," Merida admitted as she walked over to Hiccup's workbench and began collecting his tools, "As good as Ah think Hiccup an' Ah taegether are, Ah didnae hae any hand in makin' 'at happen. 'At was all Hiccup an' our parents. Maybe ye cud ask Hiccup fer help. Or, if ye're desperate, yer mother."

Fishlegs chuckled as he placed the tool he was looking at down.

"If Ah can offer ye any advice, it wud be tae keep daein' whit ye're daein'," Merida said as she gathered up the tools and made her way over to Fishlegs, "It seems tae be workin' sae far."

"Thanks, Merida," Fishlegs said sincerely.

"Daennae worry about it," Merida replied with a shrug and a smile, "'At's whit friends are fer."

The two teens made to leave the smithy but Merida froze and quickly held out her hand to stop Fishlegs.

"What's wrong?" Fishlegs asked.

"Ah hear saemethin'," Merida answered before creeping up to the door and slowly cracking it open and peeking out. As she did, she gasped before pulling away to look at Fishlegs in fear.

"It's Gobber!" she whispered harshly, causing Fishlegs' eyes to go wide with fear.

"What do we do!?" Fishlegs whispered back, looking on the verge of panic, "If he finds us in here with Hiccup's tools, he's going to suspect something!"

Thinking quickly, Merida shoved the tools into Fishlegs' hands before

moving over to the smithy's large window.

"Ah'll distract him an' then ye sneak oot an' get th' tools tae Hiccup, okay?" Merida explained, earning a nod from Fishlegs. Taking a deep breath, Merida peeked through the cracks in the windows large shutters, seeing that Gobber was only a few feet away from the smithy's front door.

"Gobber!" she exclaimed as she threw open the shutters, startling the blacksmith as they slammed against the wall, "How are ye daein' this evenin'?"

"Princess!" Gobber exclaimed, looking at her in surprise, "W-Whit are ye daein' in ma shop this late at night?"

"Oh, Ah was jist lookin' fer Hiccup," Merida explained as she vaulted over the window sill and landed outside, quickly closing the window behind her, "Figured he might be here."

"Ye daen't know where he is?" Gobber asked surprised as he turned towards her. Glancing behind Gobber, Merida saw the door crack open and Fishlegs peek out. Merida gave a subtle shake of her head as she smiled broadly at Gobber.

"Nae, he disappeared earlier in th' afternoon," Merida lied, "Ah figured he might be here workin' on saemethin' here, but he's nae."

"An' here Ah thought ye two were attached at th' hip," Gobber stated with a chuckle, earning a warm smile and a blush from Merida, "Yo lot hae been spendin' a lot o' time in ma shop as o' late."

"Hiccup's been working on a lot of stuff," Merida explained as she motioned to Fishlegs, who slowly opened the door, his eyes glued to the back of Gobber's head as he crept forward, "Ah mean, hae ye seen th' sword he made?"

"Ah did," Gobber replied, stroking his chin thoughtfully, "Ah'm surprised Ah ne'er noticed him workin' on it afore. It wud take quite a while tae make a sword like 'at. An' Ah ne'er taught him how tae make a sword like 'at."

"Well, ye know Hiccup," Merida commented with a shrug as Fishlegs began to creep behind Gobber, "Ah mean, he made me ma bow an' he told me he had ne'er made a recurve bow afore."

"True enough," Gobber replied with a thoughtful nod as Fishlegs continued to slowly, cautiously sneak past him. Then, when Fishlegs was directly behind Gobber, a hammer suddenly slipped from his grasp and landed on the ground with a dull thud.

"Whit was 'at?" Gobber asked as he began to turn around, but stopped as Merida zipped over to his side, grabbing his arm to get his attention.

"Gobber!" she exclaimed, causing the blacksmith's head to whip back to look at her while Fishlegs silently scrambled to pick up the fallen tool, "There's saemethin' Ah've been meanin' tae ask ye."

"Uhâ€|whit's 'at?" Gobber questioned, caught off guard by Merida's forwardness.

"Ah was jist curiousâ€|did yer mother ever hae anythin' she brought with her from th' Highlands?" Merida questioned as she saw Fishlegs pick up the hammer and quickly scurry away, disappearing behind a building, "Ahmean, Ah know she wasâ€|taken an' everything, sae she cudnae hae brought much but Ah thought if she had saemething identifiable I could figure oot whit clan she had belonged tae."

"Why are ye daein' this, princess?" Gobber asked with a surprised, hushed voice.

Merida sighed, allowing herself to relax now that she knew that Fishlegs was safely gone. This had been something she had wanted to talk with Gobber about for a while and she was happy for the chance to speak with him alone.

"Because yo're a good man, Gobber," Merida said after a moment, looking the blacksmith in the eye, "Ye deserve tae know where ye came from."

"Thank ye, princess," Gobber said after a moment of stunned silence, a warm smile on his face, "Ahâ€|Ah think there is saemethin' ma mother had 'at cud help ye. Ah'll hae tae remember where Ah put it, but Ah'll get it tae ye as soon as Ah can."

"Sounds good," Merida replied with a grin of her own before she moved to leave, "Ah shud get gaein' now. Still hae tae find Hiccup after all."

"O' course," Gobber replied with a nod as he moved to go into the smithy, "Hae a good night, princess. Thanks again."

"Good night, Gobber," Merida replied as she began to walk away "An' ye're welcome."

As Merida made her way through the village a smile grew on her face. Slowly but surely, everything was getting better for her. She had friends on this island now. She was discovering things about dragons that no one had ever known before and was possibly helping to smooth over a centuries old conflict. She was even on good terms with Astrid! Plus, she had Hiccup, whom she had been trying to spend more time alone with, the thought of which made her bite her bottom lip as her blush brightened.

Luck really was on her side she realized as she made her way up the hill towards the edge of the village where she knew Hiccup, Fishlegs and Toothless would be. As she did, she glanced over to where the arena sat, covered in shadows cast from the surrounding, illuminated buildings. As she looked at it a thought came to her. A daring, dangerous, life-threatening thought. Maybe she could push her luck, just a little bit more.

Meanwhile,

"Where's Merida?" Hiccup questioned as he successfully disentangled himself from his harness after having detached himself from Toothless' saddle.

"I don't know," Fishlegs answered as he looked out over the village, "She was talking with Gobber when I left but you figure she'd be done by now."

"I'm going to go find her," Hiccup said as he picked up his tools.

"Why?" Fishlegs questioned, "She's in the village, it's not like she's in any danger."

"I don't know," Hiccup admitted as he began to walk down the hill towards the village, "I just have a feeling that something is going on."

"Uh, Hiccup?" Fishlegs spoke up, causing the other boy to pause and turn back towards him, "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Hiccup raised an eyebrow in confusion at his friend before he noticed that Toothless had silently begun to follow him down towards the village.

"No, no, no," Hiccup said worriedly, stepping in front of Toothless and holding his hands up in front of the Night Fury in an effort to stop the dragon from following him, "You can't go down there. That's for people, not dragons."

Toothless grunted before he moved around Hiccup, pushing the young man to the side as he continued down the hill towards the village.

"No Toothless, bad dragon!" Hiccup exclaimed as he stepped in front of the Night Fury again, standing up straight and puffing his chest out in an effort to appear more authoritative as he pointed at the ground in front of the large reptile, "Stay!"

Toothless regarded Hiccup for a few, silent moments before rolling his eyes at the Viking and pushing his way past the young man, making his way towards the village undeterred.

"Hey, wait!" Hiccup exclaimed as he chased after Toothless, "You have no idea where you're going!"

Fishlegs couldn't help but chuckle to himself as he jogged after his friend and his dragon.

Meanwhile,

Merida quietly snuck into the arena, slipping through the cage that covered the top of the structure and sliding down to the stone floor like she had done months before. The arena was eerily quiet with no one else around and was covered in long shadows cast by the moon hanging in the night sky above.

Sneaking towards the dragon pens, Merida could hear the sound of their calm breathing. No doubt most, if not all of the dragons were sleeping. As she crept closer, Merida could hear the dragons begin to stir inside their pens, sniffing at the air as they caught her scent. Ignoring the growls that began to emit from behind some of the pen doors, Merida moved towards one door in particular.

Placing her ear against the heavy wooden barricade, Merida listened to the heavy breathing and low growling on the other side. After a tense moment of silence, Merida gulped nervously before she lightly clicked her tongue. Instantly, something large and heavy slammed against the door, the impact sending Merida stumbling away as she heard the Nadder screech angrily and scratch at the wooden barricade.

As Merida took deep breathes to calm her rapidly beating heart, the sound of the portcullis blocking the entrance to the arena lifting up sent a wave of panic through her. Whirling around, she was relieved to find Hiccup and Fishlegs entering the arena with Toothless in tow.

"Merida!" Hiccup whispered harshly as he ran over to her while Fishlegs closed the portcullis behind them, "What are you doing!?"

"Whit am Ah daein'!?" Merida asked as she stared incredulously at Toothless, "Whit are ye daein'!? Whit's Toothless daein' here!? Dae ye realize how much trouble we'll all be in if anyone finds him here!?"

"He didn't exactly give us a choice," Hiccup replied with a sigh as he glared at the Night Fury who ignored the Viking as he smelt his way around the arena.

"How did ye find me?" Merida questioned.

"We didn't," Fishlegs explained, indicating to Toothless, whose ears pricked up at the sounds of the other dragons in their pens, "He made a beeline here as soon as he got free from Hiccup."

"He must have sensed the other dragons," Hiccup commented, before turning his attention back towards Merida, "You didn't answer my question. Why did you come here, Mer? Why were you messing around with that Nadder?"

"It's hard tae explain," Merida answered with a sigh, "I jist feel some sort o' connection with it. Like Ah'm bonded with it saemehow. Dae ye understand or am Ah jist talkin' nonsense?"

A small smile spread across Hiccup's face as Merida looked at him pleadingly.

"I know precisely what you mean," Hiccup replied as he looked over at Toothless, who was sniffing at one of the heavy wooden doors sealing the dragon pens, "I've been feeling something exactly like that ever since we found Toothless in the cove."

"Ah jist wish Ah had a way o' talkin' tae her," Merida replied as she looked back at the pen where she knew the Nadder was, "Ah wish Ah cud prove tae her 'at Ah daenae want tae hurt her, like ye did with Toothless."

"She?" Fishlegs questioned, crooking his eyebrow at Merida, "You think it's a girl?"

"Oh, Ah know it's a girl," Merida said in a tone that brokered no

arguments as Toothless wandered back over to them, rubbing against the princess, causing her to grin and scratch him on the head, "Whit dae ye think Toothless? Any ideas on how tae woo a female Nadder?"

"He'd probably suggest fish if he could talk," Hiccup joked, "Too bad we don't have any."

Toothless seemed to glare at Hiccup over the joke before turning his gaze back to Merida. Looking up at Merida with a gaze so intense that it caught the princess by surprise, Toothless locked eyes with her for a few moments before a continuous sound began to emit from his mouth that none of the teens could identify at first.

"Is heâ€|humming?" Fishlegs asked uncertainly after a few stunned moments.

"Ah'm pretty sure he is," Merida agreed as she continued to hold Toothless' gaze, the sound of his humming filling the arena, causing the other dragons to go silent.

"Waitâ€|I know that tune," Hiccup spoke up, shock written on his face. Hearing this, Merida listened closer to the tune Toothless was humming, her eyes going wide when she realized that she too knew this song.

"_An' ferever, Ah'm dreamin' o' home,_" Merida sung, her voice barely above a whisper, her voice matching Toothless' tune perfectly, "_Ah feel sae alone. An' ferever, Ah'm dreamin' o' home._"

"Wow," Fishlegs whispered, his eyes wide with surprise, having never heard Merida sing before.

"How does he know that song?" Hiccup questioned, as he stared flabbergasted at Toothless.

"A-Ah daenae know," Merida admitted, tearing her gaze away from Toothless for the first time since the Night Fury had begun humming to look at Hiccup, "Maybe-"

Merida cut herself off when the sound of the Nadder humming the same tune began to waft through the heavy wooden door. The Nadder had a lighter, almost melodic sound to it compared to Toothless. As the three teens stared at the door behind which they knew the Nadder sat, the other dragons began to join in. From the strangely nasally sound of the Gronckle to the echoing melody of the Zippleback, to the high-pitch squeaks of the Terror, to the deep rumblings of the Timberjack to the raspy noises that could only come from the Monstrous Nightmare, all of the dragons joined in, creating a haunting tune that filled the entire arena with sound.

Slowly, the look of shock on Merida's face was replaced with one of wonder and excitement before she began to join in.

"_It flows through me now,_" she sang, her voice harmonizing with the dragons' humming, "_Sae clear an' sae loud. Ah stand where Ah am an' ferever Ah'm dreamin' o' home. Ah feel sae alone. Ferever Ah'm dreamin' o' home._"

Slowly, the humming faded away but the excitement Merida felt

threatened to overwhelm her. Rushing forward, she grabbed the release lever to the Nadder's pen before the boys realized she had even moved.

"Merida, wait!" Hiccup called out, holding his hand out in a futile attempt to stop her, but his pleas fell on deaf ears as Merida yanked down on the lever, releasing the door with a loud clunk. Taking a few, hesitant steps away from the door, Merida watched with wide eyes as the Nadder slowly nudged the door open, peaking its head out and scanning the area. Eventually, its gaze fell on Merida, who smiled reassuringly at it.

"Hi," she whispered, coaxing the wary dragon towards her, "It's okay, Ah'm nae gaein' tae hurt ye."

Slowly, Merida began to edge towards the Nadder, which took a few steps back and hissed as she got closer.

"Nae, nae, it's alright," Merida insisted, clicking her tongue at the Nadder. This seemed to give the Nadder pause before it clicked its tongue as well.

"'At's right," Merida cooed as she drew closer to the Nadder. As she moved closer, Merida held out her hand in an attempt to touch the Nadder, but the dragon hissed and shied away from her touch.

"Nae, it's okay," Merida stated before she began humming the tune again, hoping to calm the dragon as she reached out to touch it again. Instead, the Nadder gave another agitated hiss and snapped its jaws at Merida, almost biting off her hand in the process.

"Merida!" Hiccup exclaimed, taking a step forward but was stopped when Merida held out her hand behind her.

"Nae!" she exclaimed, glancing over her shoulder at Hiccup, "Stay back! Ah can dae this!"

As she looked back at Hiccup, Merida caught sight of Toothless, who was looking up at the night sky above them. Looking back at the Nadder, Merida found it had followed Toothless' gaze, looking up instead of at Merida. Glancing up at the night sky, Merida saw it was a cloudless night, the full moon shining down upon them. Returning her gaze to the Nadder, Merida saw the dragon slowly spread its wings and give a few flaps before letting out what sounded like a sigh and bringing its eyes back to the princess as it closed its wings. Merida's eyes widened as she watched the Nadder before she nervously bit her lip as a thought came to her.

"_When th' cauld wind is a callin', an' th' sky is clear an' bright_, " she sang, catching the Nadder's attention as it regarded her with its head tilted in curiosity, "_Misty mountains sing an' beckon, lead me oot intae th' light_."

"_Ah will ride, Ah will fly, chase th' wind an' touch th' sky_,_" Merida continued, smiling as she watched the Nadder bob along to the beat of the song, "_Ah will fly, spread ma wings an' touch th' sky!_"

"_Na na nana, na na nana, na na nana nana na_,_" Merida sung as she began to bounce and spin in place, the Nadder bobbing with her, "_Na

na nana, na na nana, na na nana nana na!"

"_Where dark woods hide secrets, an' mountains are fierce an' bold,_" Merida continued, continuing to hop and twirl, her smile growing as she noticed the Nadder was beginning to mimic her motions, "_Deep waters hold reflections o' times lost long ago._"

"Ah_ will hear every story, take hold o' ma own dream!_" Merida sang, doing a quick spin that twirled her hair and skirt around her before she thrust her arms into the air and clenched her hands into fists while throwing her head back, "_Be as strong as th' seas are stormy an' proud as an eagle's scream!_"

Merida laughed with delight as the Nadder spun around as well, the air stirring her hair as its tail whipped by her face, before spreading its wings up towards the sky, throwing its head back and letting out a screech.

"_Ah will ride, Ah will fly, chase th' wind an' touch th' sky,_" Merida sang as she moved back and forth, the Nadder matching her movements, "_Ah will fly, spread ma wings an' touch th' sky!_"

"_Na na nana, na na nana, na na nana nana na,_" Merida sung as she extended her arms to the side and began to skip away, the Nadder following her, its wings spread as it bobbed along behind her, the boys watching in stunned awe, "_Na na nana, na na nana, na na nana nana na!_"

"_Spread ma wings! Spread ma wings!_" Merida sang as she began to twirl in place her arms raised as the Nadder circled around her, humming to the music, "_Touch the skyyyyyyyy!_"

Merida stopped spinning as she let the last note fade, breathing hard with an exhilarated look on her face. In front of her, Merida saw the boys looking her direction. She began to say something but stopped when Hiccup nodded at something behind her. Slowly turning around as she lowered her arms, she found the Nadder standing only a few feet from her, watching her as it closed its wings against its body. Cautiously, Merida held out her hand, stopping just before she touched the Nadder, her fingers inches from its scales. The Nadder regarded her for a few moments and gave her hand an experimental sniff. After careful consideration, the Nadder leaned forwards and rubbed its nose against Merida's hand, the scales warm against her flesh.

Whipping her head around, Merida looked over at Hiccup and Fishlegs with an expression of barely contained glee, the boys smiling encouragingly at her. After a few moments, the Nadder pulled away, wiggling its nose slightly.

"Ma, arenae we a pretty girl," Merida said as she reached out and stroked the side of the Nadder's neck, the dragon giving a snort that sounded to the princess like it regarded the compliment as the most obvious thing in the world, causing the Highlander to smirk, "An' proud too."

"Merida," Hiccup gently said from behind her as he placed a hand on her shoulder, "We should get going. It's getting late and we still have to sneak Toothless back to the cove."

"Right," Merida agreed reluctantly, glancing at Toothless, who had been sitting and watching the boys the whole time before she began to lead the Nadder back over to its pen, which the dragon willingly entered after the princess gave it a few quick scratches on its neck.

"You did a really great job tonight, Mer," Hiccup congratulated her, "That was pretty spectacular."

"Thanks," Merida replied, a slight blush coloring her cheeks as she prepared to close the door to the pen.

"I guess we're going to have to name her now," Fishlegs commented, looking at Merida, "What do you think we should call her?"

"'At's easy," Merida answered, peeking into the pen and watching the Nadder curl up to go to sleep as she closed the door, "Good night, Boudica."

Later,

"Hiccup?" Merida called as she knocked on his bedroom door, "Can Ah come in?"

"Uh, sure," Hiccup replied, having already shed his vest and boots in his preparation to go to bed, his room illuminated by a single candle, "Come on in."

Merida eased the door open and stepped in, having shed her vest and boots as well, the strip of clothe she wore in her hair, her bright red locks hanging freely around her face.

"What's up?" Hiccup asked, noticing how nervous she seemed.

"Wellâ€¦Ah was jist wonderin'," Merida said, rubbing her arm anxiously, "If Ah cud sleep with ye taenight?"

"Why would you want to do that?" Hiccup asked with a surprised tone before immediately mentally kicking himself for saying something so monumentally stupid. If Merida was offended by the comment she didn't show it.

"Well, Ah figured we're gaeing tae be sharin' ane every night ance we're married, sae we might as well get used tae it, right?" Merida explained

"I don't think my dad would approve," Hiccup replied, nervously rubbing the back of his neck.

"Yer dad isnae here right now, an' whit he daenae know wonae hurt him," Merida commented, smiling gently at Hiccup, "Seems like an awful waste o' an opportunity."

"I-I guess you can stay," Hiccup stated, "Yeah sure, that will be, uh, good."

"Great!" Merida beamed before running her eyes up and down Hiccup, "Sae how dae ye, um, sleep?"

"What do you mean?" Hiccup asked, confused.

"Ah mean whit dae ye wear tae bed?" Merida questioned with a nervous laugh, "Ah'm guessin' ye daen't sleep in th' nudeâ€|dae ye?"

The two teens stared at each other, blushes on their face as they considered the implications of what Merida had said.

"Nope, nothing like that," Hiccup said quickly before pulling his pants off, revealing the briefs he wore underneath, "This is good. This right here, is what I wear. Yes."

Merida giggled nervously, biting her lip and blushing as she looked over Hiccup's lean legs.

"Okay, Ah can dae 'at," Merida said confidentially, looking at Hiccup through half-lidded eyes as she put her thumbs into the waist of her skirt and leggings and slid them off, revealing her creamy legs and the tight briefs she wore, "Is 'at good?"

Hiccup almost choked as he looked at her, his face turning beat red before he averted his eyes.

"Yeah, that's good," he choked out.

"Come on, Hic," Merida said with a laugh as she kicked her discarded clothes away, "Ye've seen me more exposed than this."

"Doesn't mean you can't leave me breathless with how pretty you are," Hiccup replied with a shrug as he turned back to look at Merida. There was a quiet moment as Merida just stared at Hiccup with a complete blank expression before literally pouncing on him, knocking him onto the bed as she smashed her lips against his. Hiccup lay for a moment in the tangle of limbs in utter shock before the feeling of the kiss drew him in, wrapping his arms around Merida as she lay on his chest, only breaking apart due to need for air.

"Ye know," Merida said, crossing her arms over Hiccup's chest, "When ye're nae busy sticking yer foot in yer mouth, ye really dae say th' most wonderful thin's."

"Thanks, I-" Hiccup began to say before a look of abject horror crossed his face.

"Whit's wrongâ€|" Merida began to trail off before her expression turned to one of surprise as Hiccup's face went bright red. Cocking an eyebrow, Merida looked down at where Hiccup and her bodies were pressed together, before looking back at him.

"Is 'at ye?" she questioned, a small grin spreading across her face.

"I-I'm so sorry," Hiccup babbled as his face turned even redder, "I-I can't control uh, it, that is, I can, kind of, it's just, you knowâ€|hardâ€|"

"Oh yes, Ah can tell it's very hard indeed," Merida whispered, a rosy tint to her cheeks as she grinned at Hiccup, whose eyes widened in surprise.

"It should, you know, go away on its own, I suppose," Hiccup explained, looking like he was ready to die of mortification

"Aye, this seems tae be th' kind o' thin' 'at needs tae be taken care o' on ane's own," Merida teased as she propped her head up with one hand and lazily drew circles on Hiccup's chest with the other, "But ye know whit they say, "Many hands make light work.""

Hiccup was completely flustered by this point, unable to form any sort of cohesive words.

"Ye're adorable," Merida stated, leaning down and kissing him again before rolling off his chest and sliding under the blanket, "Ah've had ma fill o' teasin' ye taenight. Snuff oot th' light an' come tae bed, will ye?"

"Uhâ€|yeahâ€|yeah sure," Hiccup replied, slowly regaining control of himself, dumbly snuffing out the candle and plunging the room into darkness as he slid under the blanket with Merida. Hiccup merely lay in his bed for a few moments, staring at the form of Merida lying in bed with her towards him.

"Soâ€|uh, how does this-" Hiccup began to ask but stopped when Merida reached back, grabbed both of his arms and wrapped them around her so he held her with her back pressed against his front.

"This is nice," Merida commented dreamily.

"Uh yeah, yeah it is," Hiccup agreed with a smile.

"Good night, Hiccup," Merida cooed, getting comfortable in Hiccup's arms.

"Good night, Merida," Hiccup replied, pulling Merida closer, his nose buried in her hair, her earthy aroma surrounding and relaxing him. All was right with the world as sleep's embrace began to take him. At least until his eyes shot open with a look of horror on his face. Merida could only giggle.

"Doon boy."

A/N: This chapter took a lot longer than expected but it was a blast to write! From the character interactions to the backstory to the plot advancement, I had fun with every moment of this chapter. Hope you guys liked it too! Feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

24. Touch the Sky

Chapter 24: Touch the Sky

The salt water lapped lightly at the wooden dock of Berk, the water disturbed more than usual by the two longships that were rowing through the harbor. Both ships looked like they had seen better days, their sails having been completely burned away and their hulls were scorched and battered. More Vikings that either ship was meant to hold were squeezed into the boats, looking just as bruised and beaten as their vessel.

As the villagers helped tie the two ships to the docks, Stoick stepped off one of the boats, Spitelout, Bertha and Fishguts following him as he made his way up the docks, grim expressions on their faces as they approached Gobber, who was waiting for them at the end of the dock. With them was another man roughly the same age. Unlike the others, he was tall and lanky, with auburn hair that he wore in an elaborate braid and a short goatee. He wore a dark brown shirt under a brown fur vest. He wore grey trousers over his legs along with a horned, iron helmet, leather bracers, fur-lined boots and a dragon tooth necklace. A longbow was slung around his shoulders along with a leather quiver.

"Sae," Gobber said awkwardly, "How'd it gae?"

The cold look Stoick gave him spoke volumes.

"That bad, huh?" Gobber asked, his face falling.

"We didn't find the nest," Stoick grumbled, "It cost us a number of our longships."

Stoick sighed sadly, glancing over at some of the other Viking warriors as they disembarked from the longships. One woman walked up to another waiting on shore who was watching the approaching warrior anxiously. Sadly, the warrior woman produced a waraxe and held it out to the other woman, who began to wail with despair as her body was wracked with sobs.

"And the lives of some good people," Stoick finished sadly as he looked back at Gobber, "How have things been here?"

"Well, Ah'm happy tae report 'at they've been good," Gobber replied, a smile returning to his face, "In fact, ye wonae believe it but-"

Gobber was cut off as one of the villagers ran up and clapped Stoick on the shoulder, startling the chieftain.

"Congratulations, Stoick!" the man exclaimed happily as he walked away "I never would have believed it!"

"Believed wha-" Stoick began to ask, a bewildered look on his face.

"Looks like you'll never have to worry about Hiccup again, eh Stoick?" a woman called as she walked by, a beaming smile on her face.

"What are y-" Stoick tried to question, growing more and more confused by the second.

"Looks like our problems are gone, Stoick!" Another man shouted at the befuddled chieftain.

"Gone?" Stoick asked quietly as he turned his attention back to Gobber, "He's gone?"

"Aye, most afternoons" Gobber replied with a snort of laughter, "He's usually oot in th' woods with Fishlegs an' th' princess."

Stoick made a noise that sounded like a mixture between annoyance and relief as he narrowed his eyes at Gobber.

"What is everyone talkin' about?" Stoick demanded with a growl.

"Yer boy has been performin' phenomenally in dragon trainin'," Gobber explained with a smile.

"He has?" Stoick asked, clearly stunned by the news.

"There's no way," Spitelout added, not believing a word of it.

"It's true," Gobber insisted, "Th' princess has been daein' well too, as hae Fishlegs an' Astrid."

"Fishlegs has been doing well?" Fishguts asked, surprised.

"He fought a Gronckle by himself on th' first day," Gobber informed the other man, "He almost won too."

Fishguts let out a chuckle, placing his hands on his hips and shaking his head in disbelief.

"What about Snotlout?" Spitelout questioned, crossing his arms over his chest.

"He's been alright," Gobber replied with a shrug, causing Spitelout's eyes to narrow.

"How about Junior and Ruff?" the other man spoke up with a raspy voice.

"Och, ye shud hae seen them fight th' Zippleback, Tuff. A sight tae behold, it was," Gobber said proudly, "Yer girl even got a scar tae show fer it."

"But how?" Stoick pressed, trying to wrap his head around the information he had been given.

"Hiccup has a way with th' beasts," Gobber explained, "An' th' others."

"What's that mean?" Bertha questioned.

"He's become quite th' leader amongst their group," Gobber elaborated, "They look tae him tae figure oot how tae handle th' dragons."

"Oh, I don't believe a word of that," Spitelout spat, glaring at Gobber.

"Believe whit ye want," Gobber shot back, scowling at the other man, "Ah'm nae th' anly ane who sees it."

"Who's winning?" Fishguts asked, cutting off any retort Spitelout had.

"Of 'at, Ah haenae th' foggiest o' notions," Gobber replied, "They've all been daein' remarkably well. They've figured oot things about dragons 'at even Ah didnae know about. Ah hae nae idea who Gothi is

gaein' tae pick."

"Where is Hiccup now?" Stoick asked.

"In th' woods with Fishlegs an' th' princess, like Ah said," Gobber explained, "Whit they dae in there, Ah hae nae idea."

"Well, if it was just Hiccup and the girl, I think I'd have a notion about what they were doing," Bertha joked, earning an appreciative chuckle from Fishguts and Tuff.

"Like he'd have it in him," Spitelout scoffed, earning a glare from Stoick.

"Ye'd be surprised," Gobber spoke up, a smirk on his face, "Hiccup an' th' princess hae become even closer since ye left."

"Have they now?" Stoick questioned, cocking an eyebrow at Gobber.

"You should hurry up with that marriage, Stoick," Bertha quipped, "Lest you have bastard grandchildren running around."

"To say nothing about what the Bear King would do if he found out his daughter was deflowered out of wedlock," Fishguts added with a chuckle.

"Shut it, both of ye," Stoick growled glaring at Fishguts and Bertha who chuckled in reply.

"'At's pretty funny, comin' from th' two o' ye," Gobber commented with a chuckle.

Bertha and Fishguts looked at each other in confusion before looking back at Gobber.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Bertha questioned.

"Nae really ma placed tae say," Gobber replied with a smirk before he turned and began to walk away, "Regardless, Ah hae tae be gaein', Ah hae more dragon lessons tae plan after all."

The five of them shared confused looks as the blacksmith left, chuckling to himself.

Meanwhile,

The sun shined brightly over the island of Berk, a gentle breeze wafting through the forest, stirring the leaves on the trees and pushing the white clouds that lazily drifted across the sky. In the hidden cove, the three teens stood on the shores of the lake, Toothless sunbathing not far away.

Fishlegs and Merida were looming over Hiccup as he kneeled on the ground, using a stone mortar and a wooden pestle to grind what looked like a clump of black powder.

"So, what exactly are you planning on doing with this stuff, Hiccup?" Fishlegs questioned as Hiccup finished, standing up with the mortar in hand.

"Just doing an experiment," Hiccup explained, as he pulled a cloth bag from his vest and began pouring the powder in, "I want to see if black powder is as potent as black rock, like Hilde said."

"How dae ye plan on daein' 'at?" Merida asked as Hiccup tied the bag closed.

"Can I have one of your arrows?" Hiccup questioned, turning to Merida and holding a hand out to her.

"Uh, sure," Merida replied as she blinked in surprise, reaching into her quiver and pulling out an arrow before handing it to him.

"Thanks," Hiccup said with a warm smile as he took the offered weapon. Holding the arrow in one hand, he tied the bag holding the powder to the weapon's shaft with the other. Once he was done he reached into his vest and pulled out a short length of rope, which he entwined with the bag before handing the whole thing back to Merida.

"Um, whit dae ye want me tae dae with this, Hic?" Merida questioned, a quizzical expression on her face.

"Notch it on your bow, if you would," Hiccup instructed as he pulled some flint and iron from his belt. Merida nodded and unslung her bow before notching the arrow to the bowstring, having to compensate for the arrow's extra weight.

"Whit now?" Merida asked.

"Now, I need you to fire into the cove wall over there," Hiccup instructed, pointing to the wall a good distance away from them as he began striking the flint and iron together, creating sparks that he was trying to ignite the rope with, "We'll see just how much of a bang this stuff packs."

"Are ye sure this is a good idea?" Merida asked wearily.

"Yeah, it will be fine, don't worry," Hiccup answered reassuringly while Merida made a face that showed she was anything but reassured. Glancing over her shoulder at Fishlegs, she was surprised to find the larger boy had been slowly backing away, a frightened expression on his face. Merida shot a glare at him, to which Fishlegs replied with a shrug as he continued backing away.

After a few moments, the rope caught, grey smoke rising from it as the fire moved towards the bag of black powder.

"Alright! It's lit!" Hiccup exclaimed as he quickly stood up and stepped behind Merida, who fired the arrow into the cliffside. There were a few tense moments as the three teens watched the spot where the arrow had struck, grey smoke continuing to rise. Then, all of a sudden, the smoke ceased while the arrow and bag sat in the cliff wall as if nothing had happened.

"Damn," Hiccup swore as he and the others relaxed, "I was sure that wo-"

Hiccup was interrupted by the thunderous, fiery explosion that ripped a chunk of the cliff wall apart, the force of the blast knocking the three teens off of their feet as bits of rock rained down around them. Blinking in surprise, the trio pushed themselves into seated positions as they all looked at the freshly made hole in the cliffside that was belching black smoke, a few tiny fires burning on the scorched rock. Toothless, alerted by the explosion, came bounding over to them, looking around for any sign of danger with wide, wild eyes.

The three teens just sat on the hard ground looking at the damage they had caused, trying to process what had happened.

"Zat was quite impressife," a voice said from behind them, causing all of them, including Toothless, to jump in surprise, finding Hilde standing behind them, smiling like she had been there the entire time. Her crow cawed in greeting from its perch on her shoulder.

"Hilde!" Merida greeted with a smile as she pushed herself to her feet, "It's been a few days since we last saw ye."

"I've been busy, Jaeger," Hilde explained as she looked over at Toothless and smiled, "And I see you all hafe been as vell. Hello, drache."

Toothless watched Hilde curiously, his head tilted to the side. He sniffed her out of curiosity before suddenly jumping back as if startled. The other's watched Toothless in surprise while Hilde smiled knowingly.

"Whit's up with him?" Merida questioned, watching Toothless back away cautiously, the look on his face expressing surprise more than any other emotion.

"I suppose I'm just not vat he expected," Hilde replied with a shrug, an enigmatic smile on her face.

"What brings you here, Hilde?" Hiccup questioned.

"Checking up on you zree, of course," Hilde explained as she turned to face them, "Seems you hafe been learning zee secrets of zee black rock."

Hiccup gave an embarrassed smile as he scratched the back of his head while Hilde looked over at Toothless, who was watching the group from afar.

"As vell as learning zee secret of dragons," she continued before turning back to the teens, "You've done vell in your training of two dragons."

The teens looked at the old woman in shock.

"How did yeâ€¦|" Merida began to say in surprise.

"A little bird told me," Hilde explained.

Her crow puffed his feathers proudly.

"Vell, maybe not so little," Hilde added cheekily.

The crow cawed at Hilde indignantly but she ignored it.

"You hafe quite zee voice, Jaeger," Hilde commented with a smile.

"Uh, thank ye, Hilde," Merida replied with a blush, tucking a hair behind her ear.

"Vat made you do it?" Hilde questioned.

"Excuse me?" Merida asked, confused by the question.

"Vhy did you choose to sing to zee dragon?" Hilde clarified, "Or, efen more interesting, vhy did you open zee door?"

"Ahâ€|Ahâ€|" Merida mumbled, struggling to find an answer as Hiccup and Fishlegs watched her with curiosity.

"Vhy did you do somezing zat any rational mind vould know vould likely get you killed?" Hilde pushed.

"Becauseâ€|Becauseâ€|" Merida tried to say, glancing over at Hiccup before looking at the ground, her face red with embarrassment.

"Because vhy?" Hilde asked gently, reaching out and placing one of her hands on Merida's arm, "Zere is nozing to be ashamed of, my dear."

"Because Ah knew it wud work," Merida stated quietly after a moment, "Because Ah felt it wud work."

"Felt it vhere?" Hilde questioned, a smile growing on her face.

"In ma gut," Merida answered, looking Hilde in the eye.

"You followed your instincts," Hilde surmised, taking her hand off of Merida's arm with a beaming smile, "Like a true hunter. A true jaeger."

"Hunter?" Merida questioned in surprise as she reached up and touched her bow, "Is 'at whitâ€|"

"Jaeger means?" Hilde finished for her, before turning to look at Fishlegs, "Vhy yes, yes it is. Zough I believe some of you already knew zat. Isn't zat right, Leser?"

Hiccup and Merida turned to look at Fishlegs who cast his eyes to the ground and began nervously rubbing his arm.

"Fishlegs what does she mean?" Hiccup questioned.

"Leser knows a lot of zings," Hilde stated, "Zat's vhy I decided to call him Leser. Vat does zat mean?"

"Reader," Fishlegs replied quietly.

"Fishlegs, why didnae ye tell us whit those names meant?" Merida

questioned, "We jist thought they were terms o' endearment."

"Yeah, why didn't you say anything?" Hiccup added.

"Because of what your name means," Fishlegs replied, looking at Hiccup.

"Why?" Hiccup asked cautiously, "What does it mean?"

"â€|Rider," Fishlegs said quietly.

"It means rider?" Hiccup repeated, surprised.

"Yeah, I didn't think anything of it until you hopped on Toothless' back and started flying around," Fishlegs explained, "And then when I did, I was worried you guys would think I was crazy or something."

"You schould always trust your friends, Leser," Hilde stated with a smile, "And yourself, you're right more often zan you sink."

"So, why did you choose to call me Rider?" Hiccup questioned, turning his attention back to Hilde.

"Because I had a feeling in my gut," Hilde replied, turning her eyes to Merida, "And I always trust my instincts."

"You have some very specific instincts," Hiccup commented, earning a shrug from Hilde.

"So, is today zee day?" Hilde asked.

"The day for what?" Hiccup questioned in confusion.

"For flying of course!" Hilde said with a laugh, "Isn't today zee day you and your dragon are going to truly fly for zee first time?"

"How did youâ€|" Hiccup began to ask but trailed off when Hilde gave him a look, "Right, right, crows and guts and all that."

"So you are prepared to fly?" Hilde asked.

"I guess," Hiccup replied, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a piece of folded parchment. Unfolding it, he showed it to Hilde, revealing a set of instructions for using Toothless' tailfin.

"I got this cheat sheet to help me remember the control when I'm up there," Hiccup explained.

"Hmm, yes, I see. May I look at it?" Hilde asked, holding her hand out to Hiccup.

"Uh, yeah sure, here," Hiccup replied, handing Hilde the parchment.

"Zank you," Hilde stated as she took the parchment and began studying it, her crow looking along with her. Both the bird and its owner cocked their heads to the side as they studied the writing on the parchment. After a moment, Hilde turned the parchment over, as if trying to figure out which side was up. Looking up at Hiccup, Hilde

cocked a questioning eyebrow at the boy before she quickly tore the parchment up before throwing the remains into the air so that they showered around her.

"Hey!" Hiccup exclaimed, reaching out far too late to stop her, only to come to a dead stop as Hilde stuck a long, gnarled finger in his face.

"You don't need it," Hilde stated plainly, looking Hiccup dead in the eye, "And it's foolish to zink you do."

"But-" Hiccup tried to argue but Hilde continued on.

"Vat vere you going to do?" Hilde questioned, "Consult your little cheat scheet as zee vind whipped by and zee earth came rushing to greet you?"

"I just thought-" Hiccup tried to say but Hilde cut him off again.

"Zat's zee problem, you're zinking too much," Hilde stated, withdrawing her hand, "Zere's a time and place for zinking, but up zere, in zee heat of zee moment, is not it. Up zere it will get you killed."

Hiccup paused for a quiet moment as he let Hilde's words sink in.

"So what should I do?" Hiccup questioned.

"As I said before, one must always trust their instincts," Hilde stated with a smirk, "I did not name you Reiter idly. Riding is in your blood."

"What do you mean?" Hiccup asked, confused, "There have never been horses on Berk until Merida came, nobody in my family knows how to ride."

"My dear boy, vatefer made you sink I vas talking about riding horses?" Hilde questioned with a smirk.

There was a stunned silence as the three teens stared at Hilde.

"Whit are ye tryin' tae say?" Merida questioned quietly.

"Remember ven I told you zat you vere not zee first people to interact with dragons peacefully?" Hilde asked in return.

"Yes," Hiccup replied, "You never told us who it was."

"You already know his name," Hilde answered with a chuckle, "You hear it efery day."

"You mean Hiccup the First, don't you?" Fishlegs asked, his eyes widening in realization, "Are you saying that he was friends with dragons?"

"No, I'm saying he rode zem," Hilde replied simply.

The stunned silence that followed was twice as long as the one that had come before it.

"Why have we never heard about this before?" Fishlegs questioned, "Everything I've read about him says Hiccup the First fought dragons."

"Much like people, some dragons are good, others are evil," Hilde explained with a shrug, "And you must keep in mind that writers are people and people lie. I trust you find that accounts are rather quiet on the nature of Hiccup the First's death?"

Fishlegs nodded.

"That's because he was killed by his brother the Thugheart for doing exactly what you are doing now," Hilde explained.

"Well, that's encouraging," Hiccup commented sarcastically as Merida gasped lightly in shock.

"I do not mean to dishearten you, Reiter," Hilde said with a chuckle, "That was a different time and things have changed even more than you know. What I was trying to do was show you that you are prepared for this. You need only trust yourself."

Hilde reached out and lightly patted Hiccup on the arm.

"It's in your blood," Hilde finished with a large smile.

A warm smile spread across Hiccup's features, matched by those of his friends.

"Sae whit dae ye say, Hic?" Merida questioned with a smirk as she placed her hands on her hips, "Fancy a fly?"

Hiccup looked over at her and gave her a confident smirk.

"You know it."

A few minutes later and the group had gathered on the cliffside near Toothless' cove. Fishlegs was busy securing the saddle to Toothless' back with Hilde looking on as Hiccup slipped on his harness. Glancing to his side, he saw Merida peel off her vest and began putting on the harness that she had insisted he make for her earlier that day.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked in a teasing manner.

"Whit, ye thought ye were gaein' on yer first real flight without me?" Merida chided as she tightened the clasps on her harness before producing the extra rope line he had made with the harness and attaching one end to her belt, "Dream on, dragonrider."

Hiccup could only smile in reply as he made his way over to Toothless, Merida following behind him.

"How's he looking, bud?" Hiccup asked Fishlegs as the larger boy stepped away from Toothless.

"He should be all set," Fishlegs said with a smile and a thumbs up. Hiccup nodded in return before hopping on to Toothless' back, the dragon antsy with anticipation as the young man helped Merida onto the saddle behind him.

"Okay, hook yourself in," Hiccup said, taking the line from his harness and attaching it to Toothless' saddle.

"You ready?" Hiccup asked, looking back over his shoulder at her.

"Ready," Merida answered as she hooked herself in as well before wrapping her arms around Hiccup's stomach and resting her chin on his shoulder.

"Alright, buddy," Hiccup said as he patted Toothless on the head, "How about you? Ready to fly again?"

Toothless barked excitedly as his whole body shook with excitement.

"Alright," Hiccup replied, firmly setting his feet in the stirrups.

"Good luck," Fishlegs said encouragingly.

"Remember Reiter," Hilde added, standing next to Fishlegs, "Trust your instincts."

Hiccup nodded before turning his attention to the cliff, and the sea beyond it. Urging Toothless forward, the dragon and riders stood on the precipice of the cliff, looking down at the sea churning against the rocks below. Merida pulled herself closer to Hiccup.

"Okay," Hiccup said, narrowing his eyes in determination, "Let's go!"

With that, Toothless hopped off the cliff, plunging towards the rocks and water below. As they fell, Toothless began to spread his wings while Hiccup looked down nervously at the stirrups.

"I thinkâ€|" Hiccup said nervously, glancing at the quickly approaching ocean, "I thinkâ€|it'sâ€|this one!"

Pushing down on the stirrup, Hiccup caused Toothless' tail to flare, changing their trajectory and sending them flying perpendicular to the water, the sea spraying them as they flew.

"Cuttin' it a wee close, arenae we?" Merida commented as she watched Hiccup wearily as her bright red hair streamed behind her like a comet's tail, Toothless grunting in agreement, "It's like Hilde said, ye hae tae stop thinkin' sae much!"

"I know! I know!" Hiccup shouted as they skimmed across the ocean, the waves breaking just a few feet beneath them. Taking a calming breath, Hiccup pushed down on the stirrup again, which caused Toothless to go careening to the side, almost crashing into the sea.

"Sorry!" Hiccup exclaimed as he readjusted them, which did little to

mollify Toothless as the dragon grumbled angrily before reaching up and slapping Hiccup across the face with one of his ear flaps.

"Hey! I said sorry!" Hiccup shouted in annoyance but the dragon paid him no heed as he moved to climb higher into the air, Hiccup adjusting the tail fin to allow him to.

"Where are we gaein'!?" Merida called over the wind as Toothless climbed towards the clouds.

"Up, I'm guessing," Hiccup stated as they continued to climb, angling back towards Berk. Looking back over her shoulder, Merida let out a shocked gasp as she saw the island of Berk stretched out before her. From the forest to the cliffs to the village and its harbor to the great rocky crag at the center of the island, she could see everything and it was breathtaking.

"Hiccup," Merida said, her voice barely above a whisper, "Hic, ye hae tae see this."

"Wow," Hiccup muttered in amazement as he looked back at the landscape stretched out below them. As he looked, his foot accidentally slipped from the stirrup and Toothless' tail fin slammed shut. The Night Fury let out a confused grunt before he began to plummet back to the earth. The sudden change in direction caused both Merida and Hiccup to rise out of their seats, their safety lines being the only things keeping them from floating away from Toothless.

"Hiccup!" Merida screamed in terror as they began to fall towards the ground.

"Pull yourself in!" Hiccup instructed as he grabbed his safety line and yanked himself back into Toothless' saddle, Merida quickly following suit before grabbing on to the young man as tightly as she could.

As the earth came rushing towards them, Hiccup held the grips of the saddle so tightly his knuckles turned white. A million thoughts raced through Hiccup's mind as he tried to figure out what to do, but failing to do anything at all, squeezing his eyes closed to try and focus.

"_Trust your instincts_," the memory of Hilde's voice cutting through his thoughts like a knife through cloth, "_It's in your blood_."

All at once, Hiccup felt a calmness come over him, his senses sorting through the stimuli that surrounded him. The whistling of the wind rushing past his ears. The combined warmth of Merida and Toothless contrasting the cool air rushing by. Merida's earthy smell mixing with Toothless' sulfuric one. Taking a deep, calming breath, Hiccup opened his eyes and pressed down on the stirrup.

Toothless spread his wings wide as they went, the wind blasting by as they leveled off and went zooming down the hill towards the cliffs mere feet above the tree tops, the branches rippling in their wake. It took every ounce of Toothless' strength to keep his wings from snapping backwards against the drag of the air as Hiccup and Merida hung on for dear life.

The two teens and the dragon went whizzing over the cliffs and back out over the ocean, shooting past Fishlegs and Hilde.

"Whoa!" Fishlegs exclaimed, adjusting his helmet as the wind from the Night Fury's passing blasted them, "Look at them go!"

"He's trusting his instincts," Hilde commented with a smirk.

"Odin's beard!" Fishlegs exclaimed as he watched Toothless and the two teens go flying across the water, "They're heading right for the rocks!"

"Not to worry, Leser," Hilde stated, her smile growing, "He knows exactly what he's doing."

"Hiccup!" Merida said worriedly as they shot towards the forest of rock outcroppings that surrounded the island, still burning off the momentum of their freefall.

"It's okay!" Hiccup shouted back as they approached the weather-worn monoliths, "I've got this!"

As Toothless shot into the rocks, Hiccup banked him to the side, sending the dragon swinging around the stone spire before using the momentum to shoot around a second rock in the opposite direction. As they came around the rock, they found another one wedged between two other pillars directly in front of them.

"Duck!" Hiccup shouted as Toothless swooped under the rock so close that as Merida ducked her head, she felt her hair graze against the salty stone.

"This last part looks tricky!" Hiccup called as they approached two stone pillars that only had a small gap between them but were too large and too close to get around at the speed they were flying, "Hold on!"

Pulling to the side, Toothless closed his wings as he entered the crevice sideways, Hiccup and Merida pressing their bodies tightly against the Night Fury. For an instant everything was dark as the unforgiving rock sped by, then the trio broke free, Toothless opening up his wings and spinning around before they hit the water, sending them skimming across the open ocean.

"You did it!" Merida exclaimed ecstatically as she hugged Hiccup with all her strength and kissed him on the cheek as the young man threw his hands in the air and let out a whoop of exhilaration. Toothless barked his agreement, a look of pure joy on his face as he fired a plasma blast in triumph. The purple ball of flame burst in front of them creating a sooty cloud that they were about to fly directly into.

"Aw, come on," Hiccup groaned as he dropped his arms while Merida ducked behind his back.

Later,

The five of them sat on the cliff as the sun began to set into the sea, coloring the sky with oranges and yellows. They were gathered around a small fire that Hiccup and Toothless had built, cooking fish

that the Night Fury had caught over the flames. Toothless was chowing down on a pile of fish that he had gathered for himself. Merida snickered as she looked over at Hiccup, whose face was still marked with soot and hair still slightly swept back. Hiccup merely rolled his eyes while smirking at his girlfriend, who snuggled up to him as they roasted their fish.

As they sat, the sound of high pitched screeching caught their attentions. Looking up, they saw a group of four Terrible Terrors approaching them. Toothless snarled angrily as he watched the small dragons approach, covering his pile of fish with his front paws. As one Terror moved towards Toothless' fish pile, the Night Fury snapped his jaws at it, which distracted him long enough for a second Terror to dart in and drag half a fish away. Toothless watched in annoyance as the Terror bickered with a third over the food before chasing it away with a blast of fire.

Glancing back at his fish pile, Toothless noticed the fourth Terror trying to make off with a whole fish. Snarling, Toothless lashed out and grabbed the other end of the fish with his mouth, entering into a short tug of war with the smaller dragon. Giving a quick yank, Toothless pulled the fish from the Terror's grasp, leaving it only a mouthful of fish fin as he swallowed the fish whole before making a noise that sounded like mocking laughter directed at the smaller dragon.

The others watched wearily as the Terror angrily spat out the fin and began growling and posturing towards Toothless, who watched with bemusement. As the Terror took a breath to shoot Toothless with a miniature fire blast, Toothless spat a glob of plasma down the smaller dragon's throat, causing it to briefly swell up like balloon as its attack backfired, before it wandered off in a daze with smoke trailing from its nose and mouth.

"Huh, not so fireproof on the inside are you?" Hiccup questioned as Merida coaxed the Terror over and broke off a piece of her fish.

"Here ye gae," she said, feeding the Terror from her hand. After the Terror happily ate the piece of fish, it carefully wandered to Merida's side before curling up next to her. Merida looked at the Terror in wonder before slowly reaching down and caressing the dragon's head, causing it to purr.

"Wow," Hiccup said with amazement, "Fishlegs, I hate to tell you, but I'm starting to think everything we know about these guys is wrong."

"Great," Fishlegs replied with a disappointed sigh, "Good to know all that time memorizing the Dragon Manual was a waste."

"It was hardly a waste, Leser," Hilde said with a chuckle as her crow pecked at the fish head Toothless had given it, flapping its wings and cawing angrily as the Terror's tried to steal its meal, "Despite what Reiter says, your information is not wrong, merely incomplete."

"Well then, Ah guess it's our job to complete it," Merida stated.

"I am sure you vill," Hilde replied with one of her enigmatic smiles, "Of zat, I am certain."

A/N: Another fun chapter to write, I especially enjoyed writing the flying scene. It was also nice to write Hilde again after a few chapters of her not appearing. I wanted to reveal a little about her, but not too much, I hope you guys liked it! Mysteries are fun right? As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

25. Family Matters

Chapter 25: Family Matters

Night had fallen over the village by the time the trio had parted ways with Hilde and Toothless. Merida and Hiccup said their goodnights to Fishlegs as the larger boy headed for home while they made their way towards the smithy, their hands clasped together and their harnesses slung over their shoulders.

The two were chatting amicably as they walked up to the smithy and opened the door. They were surprised to find Stoick within, looking over something on Hiccup's workbench.

"Dad!" Hiccup exclaimed in surprise, quickly tossing his harness into a dark corner as Merida followed suite, "You're back!"

"Indeed, I am," Stoick replied as he placed the item he had been looking at back on the workbench before turning to face the two teenagers.

"Well, uh, Gobber's probably already headed home for the night," Hiccup explained, as he glanced at the sketchbook sitting on the workbench, apparently untouched by his father.

"I know," Stoick answered simply, looking between the two, "I came lookin' for you two."

"You did?" Hiccup asked, glancing nervously at Merida who shared his worried look.

"You two have been keepin' secrets," Stoick stated ominously.

"W-We have?" Hiccup stammered as Merida looked like she might start to panic.

"Just how long did ye think ye could hide it?" Stoick asked, narrowing his eyes at the pair.

"Weâ€¦uhâ€¦we daenae knowâ€¦" Merida began to say but couldn't seem to find the words to express her thoughts.

"Nothin' happens on this island without me hearin' about it, girl" Stoick stated with an almost threatening tone.

"Oh," Merida replied quietly, looking at his feet.

"Soâ€¦let's talk about that dragon," Stoick said as he took a step towards the two.

"Oh, gods," Hiccup whispered as his chill went down his spine while Merida's eyes went as wide as saucer plates, "Dad, I'm so sorry. I-I was going to tell you. I just didn't know how toâ€¦"

Hiccup trailed off as Stoick began to chuckle before it turned into a full blow belly laugh. Hiccup and Merida glanced at each other before they began to nervously laugh along with Stoick.

"You'reâ€¦not upset?" Hiccup questioned through his forced laughter.

"What!?" Stoick exclaimed like it was the strangest question he had ever heard, "I was hoping for this!"

"Yeâ€¦were?" Merida questioned in confusion.

"All this time the village spent thinkin' ye were useless, and it turns out ye were born to fight dragons!" Stoick laughed as Hiccup and Merida shared surprised looks, "It's almost poetic, is what it is."

"And believe me, it only gets better!" Stoick said happily as he began to wave his arms around excitedly, "Wait till ye spill a Nadder's guts for the first time or mount yer first Gronckle head on a spear!"

Merida paled and looked ill at the thought while Hiccup seemed to become twice as uneasy as he had been before.

"What a feelin'!" Stoick exclaimed as he playfully punched Hiccup in the shoulder with enough force to knock him into the wall, laughing and pointing a finger at the young man as Merida rushed over and helped him to his feet, "Ye really had me goin' there, son!"

"All those years of bein' the worst Viking Berk had ever seen," Stoick continued joyfully, not noticing the hurt expression on Hiccup's face or the sigh of exasperation coming from Merida, "Odin, it was rough. I almost gave up on ye and all the while you were holding out on me! Oh Thor!"

Stoick sighed happily before he turned his attention to Merida.

"And you!" he exclaimed, a beaming smile on his face that caused Merida to flinch back in alarm, "I dare say ye've surprised me even more! When ye were first comin' here, I was expectin' some prissy princess who wouldn't know which end of the sword to hold. Then, when I left I was worried ye'd get yerself killed in the arena, or worse, ye'd kill one of the others. Instead, Gobber says ye're one of the best dragon fighters he's ever seen, to say nothin' about yer skill as an archer! This whole arranged marriage is turning out better than I could have possibly imagined!"

Merida couldn't help but smile at Stoick's enthusiasm as she blushed under his praise.

"But the best part," Stoick said as he grabbed a nearby stool, sat on it and scooted closer to the two teens, "is that I finally have somethin' to talk about with the two of ye."

An awkward silence fell over the smithy as Hiccup and Merida looked nervously at Stoick's beaming face, failing to think of anything they could say to the Viking chief. After a few moments, Stoick's smile began to fall away from his face. It was another quiet moment before Stoick's eyes lit back up as he seemed to remember something.

"Oh, right," he said as he began rummaging around the table to his side as he looked for something, "I got some things I wanted to give to the two of ye."

Pulling out a horned helmet similar to his own, he handed it to Hiccup, who took it by the horns as he held it in his hands.

"It's a helmet," Stoick said simply, "To keep ye safe in the ring."

"Uh, thanks, Dad," Hiccup replied with a genuine, if awkward smile.

"It's made from yer mother's breastplate. Part of a matching set," Stoick explained as he indicated to his own helmet, not noticing Hiccup's eyes go wide as he paled a little while Merida's glanced down at her body self-consciously, "Keeps her close."

"Wowâ€|" Hiccup whispered awkwardly, "Thatâ€|That's something, Dad."

"As for you," Stoick said as he indicated to Merida, who jumped with a start and whipped her head up, blushing in embarrassment for being caught musing, "I have this."

Stoick pulled out a Viking style broadsword in a leather scabbard and handed it to Merida, who took it with wide eyes. The sword was slightly big for her but she was able to carry it easy enough in two hands. Grabbing the dark leather-bound grip of the sword's hilt, Merida pulled the blade a few inches out of the scabbard, revealing the finally polished metal of the sword along with some runes that had been carved into the steel.

"Whitâ€|Whit is this?" Merida asked as she turned her confused gaze back to Stoick.

"That was Val's sword," Stoick explained, a small smile on his face, "And now it's yers. I figured that as good as ye are with a bow, it's not goin' to help ye if the enemy is only three feet in front of ye. You need somethin' to protect yourself with in that case."

"Nae," Merida said as she slid the blade back into its scabbard and tried to hand the sword back to Stoick, "Ah-Ah cudnaeâ€|"

"Ye can," Stoick replied as he reached out and gently pushed the sword back to Merida, "And ye will. Val would want ye to have it. She would have liked ye, Merida, I know it."

Merida found she had no more words to argue with as she took the broadsword back and began to look it over with a sense of wonder.

"We'll have to change the inscription on the scabbard," Stoick mused as he indicated to one side of the scabbard where she assumed Val's

name was written in Runic.

Taking the sword by the hilt, Merida pulled the broadsword all the way out of its scabbard and took a better look at the runes written on the blade, her mother's lessons in Runic coming in handy once again.

"She named it Dragonsbane," Merida observed as she placed the scabbard down and held the broadsword with both hands to test its weight.

"Aye, and there has never been a blade with a truer name," Stoick chuckled before the smile fell away from his face, "In the end though, there was little it could do to save her."

Merida looked at Stoick sympathetically as she rested Dragonbane's tip against the ground.

"Hiccup told me what happened to her, he told me about Alvin the Treacherous," Merida stated as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, "Ah'm so sorry."

"Thank ye, and don't worry about Alvin. He'll get what's comin' to him," Stoick said as his eyes fell on Hiccup, who's grip tightened around the horns of his helmet, "One way or another."

Clapping his hands, Stoick took a deep breath and all the negative emotions seemed to disappear from his features.

"Anyway, from what I understand, ye have a sword of your own now, son," Stoick stated as he looked at his son expectantly.

"Uh yeah," Hiccup said as he put his helmet down before grabbing Broom from where he left it leaning against his drawing table and held it up for Stoick to take, "Here it is."

Reaching out, Stoick gingerly took Broom in his hand, the saber seemingly better suited as a knife for a man of his size. Carefully, he pulled Broom out of its scabbard and looked it over.

"This is probably one of the smallest swords I've ever seen in my life," Stoick commented as he turned the sword over in his hand, the blade glowing as it caught the candlelight, "I think I had a toy sword that was bigger than this. At the same time, I don't think I've seen a more finely crafted blade."

Gently, he reached out and touched the tip of the sword with his finger, before hissing in pain and surprise while pulling his finger back to inspect it.

"Nor one sharper," Stoick added as he saw blood slowly ooze out of the tiny cut on his fingertip. Taking Broom as his father handed it back to him, Hiccup quickly slid the saber back into its scabbard and placed it on his work table.

"That is a fine sword, son. Well, incredible even" Stoick praised as he wiped his blood on his sleeve, "I'd say ye're a better blacksmith than even Gobber. It seems like ye'll surpass me as a dragon slayer one day too."

"Wellâ€¦I'm not sure about that, Dad," Hiccup replied as he scratched the back of his head, feeling a bit ashamed of himself for accepting praise for something he didn't make.

"No need to be humble, Hiccup," Stoick grinned as he reached out and patted his son on the shoulder, almost knocking Hiccup over in the process, "You have a bright future ahead of ye, I can tell."

Looking back at the workbench, Stoick reached out and picked up the item he had been holding before.

"What is this by the way?" Stoick asked as he turned it over in his hand, "Another one of yer inventions?"

"Yeah," Hiccup replied with a smirk, "I call it a crossbow."

"Crossbow?" Stoick questioned, "Doesn't look half as powerful as a regular bow. What's it for?"

"Well, I've never been good at holding a bow steady, so I made that to do it for me," Hiccup explained as his father continued to fiddle with the crossbow, "The string is also pulled tighter than a normal person could-Dad don't touch that!"

As Hiccup held his hand up to stop his father, Stoick's finger brushed the trigger, causing the bowstring to snap forwards and shoot the arrow that Hiccup has left loaded in the weapon. Shooting through the air, the arrow struck a shield hanging from the wall on the other side of the smithy and ricocheted off. All three of them watched as the arrow rapidly bounced between the various pots, pans and assorted weapons and armor hanging around the shop before it came shooting back towards them.

"Look oot!" Merida shouted as she pulled Hiccup to the side a split second before the arrow shot through the space he had been standing and slammed into the wall, burying itself so deep in the wall that the arrow head stuck out the other side.

The three of them stared at the arrow as it seemed to hum with unspent energy before going quiet. Slowly, Merida and Hiccup turned to look at Stoick, who was still holding the crossbow in his hand with a bewildered expression on his face. Glancing at the teens before looking at the crossbow, Stoick carefully put the weapon back down on the workbench and quickly pulled his hands away.

"Uh, sorry about thatâ€¦" Stoick said as he tried to regain his composure, "Ye probably shouldn't leave that thing lying around with an arrow in it from now on, son."

"Y-Yeah, good idea," Hiccup said shakily.

"Anyway, I should be going," Stoick stated as he began to move towards the door, hitting his head on a hanging pot as he went, "I'll see you two at home and good luck in the ring tomorrow."

"Yeah, will do, Dad," Hiccup replied awkwardly.

"Thank ye fer th' sword," Merida stated as she rubbed one arm with her hand.

"Yeah, and theâ€¦uhâ€¦breastâ€¦hatâ€¦" Hiccup added as he gingerly patted the helmet sitting on his work bench.

"Right, ye're welcome and uh, good night," Stoick said before squeezing through the smithy door, not noticing Hiccup and Merida give large sighs of relief as he left. Taking a moment to look around the slumbering village with a pensive look on his face, Stoick smiled and nodded in satisfaction before moving to leave. He then promptly walked into a pot hanging from the smithy's roof and knocked over a half a dozen spears, creating such a loud noise he was worried he had woken the dead, let alone the whole village.

Meanwhile,

On the outskirts of the village near the woods there was a building, looking more like a hut than a house compared to the other homes in the village, made of large sticks and unworked wood with a thatched roof. A large oak tree served as support for the house and part of it had been hollowed out for the occupants to use.

It was to this house that Tuffnut Senior walked up to with a smile on his face.

"Ugh, Mom!" he could hear a voice called through the door, "Tuff took my knife! Again!"

"Relax, I just need it for a second," he heard his son reply as Tuffnut reached for the door handle.

"Oh, I'll give you a second," Ruff replied as Tuffnut paused at the door, "Time's up!"

There was a loud crash followed by the distinctive cry of his son shouting about how badly he was hurt.

"Alright, that's enough!" he heard his wife call out, "I swear that if you two don't stop this nonsense right now, when you're father gets home all he's going to find are two-"

"Two what dear?" Tuffnut Senior asked as he walked through the door. Just past the door was the house's small parlor, on the floor of which his twin children were laying in such a tangle of limbs that he couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. Looming over them was the disapproving form of his wife. She was more thickly built than he was, with a braid of long, platinum blonde hair running down her back. She looked at him with dark blue eyes and smiled at him while wiping her hands on the skirt of her forest green dress.

"Two of the most ill behaved children on this godsforsaken island," his wife answered as she walked over and embraced him, giving Senior a quick kiss on the lips, "I swear these two are going to be the death of me, Tuff."

"I doubt that, Stikes," Senior replied with a chuckle as she pulled away, "Didn't you and Stoans used to terrorize your mother?"

"Yes and I'm sure she's laughing at me from Valhalla right now," Stikes grumbled as she placed her hands on her hips, "It's her fault twins run in our family anyway."

"Come on, Mom, we're not that bad," Ruff grouched as she and Tuff disentangled themselves and walked over to their father, who Ruff threw her arms around, "Hi Daddy."

"Hi Pumpkin," Senior greeted in turn, kissing the top of Ruff's forehead.

"Give me a break," Tuff groaned as he rolled his eyes at the display, earning a glare from his sister.

"How are you doing, Junior?" Senior asked as he reached out and ruffled Tuff's hair while Ruff moved away.

"I'm alright," Tuff replied with a smirk.

"So, how's dragon training been you two?" Senior asked as he set his bow and quiver aside.

"Awesome!" Ruff exclaimed as she threw her fists in the air, before pointing at the scar on her cheek, "Check it out, I got a sick scar."

"My, that is a nice scar," Senior commented as he cupped Ruff's chin and turned her head to get a better look at it, "How did you get that?"

"Zippleback's tooth grazed me," Ruff explained as she pulled back, "Venom knocked me for a loop but I'm okay now."

"Good to hear," Senior said with a nod of approval, "Gobber tells me your whole group has been doing well. Told me you two practically took down a Zippleback by yourselves."

"Yeah, we're pretty awesome," Tuff boasted cockily.

"It really took all of us to beat the Zippleback," Ruff insisted, rolling her eyes at her brother "Especially when the venom laid me out."

"Fine, she's right," Tuffnut admitted with a sigh.

"Heard you've been getting along with the others pretty well too," Senior stated as he slid off his boots.

"Yeah, Hiccup's cooler than most people give him credit for. Sure seems to know what he's doing when we're fighting the dragons," Tuff explained, "Fishlegs too, plus the guy's got muscles as big as his brain. Saw him lift a whole section of this wooden wall by himself."

"What about the princess?" Senior asked as he sat down in one of their wooden chairs.

"Red? Dad, she's so awesome, you have no idea," Ruff replied excitedly, "She's saved my butt a couple of times in the arena and she's even better with a bow and arrow than you are."

"Really now?" Senior questioned with a smirk and a chuckle, "Well, we'll have to invite her along next time we go hunting, won't

we?"

"Sweet," Ruff agreed with a grin.

"Are right you two, that's enough stories for now," Stikes spoke up, "Go get ready for supper."

Nodding, Ruff and Tuff moved towards the kitchen, leaving their parents alone.

"Speaking of hunting, did you find the Nest?" Stikes asked as she eyed her husband.

"No," Senior sighed sadly as he slowly shook his head, "All we found were ambushes. We lost some good people out there."

"My brother?" Stikes asked in a nervous tone.

"Stoans is fine," Senior answered, causing Stikes to sigh in relief, "Take a lot more than some dragons to bring a Bergsson down, as he said. Others weren't so fortunate."

"Damn it," Stikes swore in frustration, "I should have been there."

"We needed you here, Stikes. Someone had to stay behind and protect the village," Senior replied as he stood up and placed a hand on his agitated wife's shoulder, "You wouldn't have made any difference anyway."

"I could have saved one of our people," Stikes insisted.

"Or you could have died yourself," Senior countered.

"I'm not some homewife like Ribbon Ingerman, Tuff," Stikes rounded on him, glaring at her husband, "I'm a warrior. I can take care of myself."

"I know that, Stikes," Senior sighed sadly, "Though the gods know I wish you were a homewife. The battlefield is a dangerous place for any warrior, and I don't know what I would do if I lost you."

"Tuff," Stikes began to say but was silenced when Tuffnut reached out and cupped her cheek.

"Then again, if you were any different, you wouldn't be the woman I love," Senior added with a warm smile.

"Oh, come here you," Stikes said as she reached up and grabbed the sides of Senior's head before pulling him to her and pressing their lips together."

"Ugh, gross," they heard Tuffnut groan as he reentered the room with his sister, "Do you really have to do that here?"

"Where we can see you?" Ruff added, a similar look of disgust on her face.

"Hush, the both of you," Stikes responded as she pulled away from her

husband and pushed past her children on her way to the kitchen, "Or we'll be having the both of you for dinner tomorrow."

Tuffnut Senior could only chuckle and shake his head as he followed his family towards the kitchen.

Meanwhile,

Astrid was cleaning up the dinner she had made for herself as Bertha stepped into their home. Astrid turned and smiled as she saw her.

"Welcome home, Mother," Astrid greeted happily.

"My, aren't you in a good mood," Bertha replied with a chuckle as she set her sword and shield to the side. Astrid merely shrugged in reply.

"How did the hunt go?" Astrid questioned.

"Not well," Bertha replied solemnly, shaking her head as she sat in a chair by the fire Astrid had built in their hearth, "All we found was mist, rocks and ambushes."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Astrid replied as she took her own seat by the fire.

"We'll find the nest one day," Bertha ensured her daughter, "One way or the other."

There was a quiet moment as mother and daughter watched the dancing flames in the stone hearth.

"I hear tell that your training sessions have been interesting," Bertha commented, not taking her eyes from the fire, "Among other things."

"They have been," Astrid agreed with a nod, "The others are better than I expectedâ€|or gave them credit for."

"Including the princess?" Bertha questioned, looking at her daughter with a raised eyebrow.

"Especially theâ€|" Astrid hesitated for a moment, "Especially Merida."

"I hear she saved your life in the arena," Bertha commented.

"Yes, and I hers," Astrid answered with a nod, biting her lip in nervousness, "She and I haveâ€|worked things out."

"Have you now?" Bertha pressed, her eyebrow rising even higher.

"I don't think I'll ever get over the loss of Dad. I don't think either of us will," Astrid said with a sigh, "But if we let ourselves stay angry about it, it will just eat us up inside. I don't think Dad would have wanted that."

"That seemed ratherâ€|insightful," Bertha stated, "Who have you been talking with?"

"Gothi," Astrid replied as she turned her attention back to the fire.

"Ah well, it's hard to argue with the wisdom of an Elder," Bertha observed with a nod, "I heard you injured your leg. How is it?"

"Still a little stiff, but a lot better than it was," Astrid replied as she flexed the leg in question.

"Is that why you needed Fishlegs Ingerman to carry you around the village?" Bertha questioned, a sly grin on her face as Astrid whipped her head around to stare incredulously at her mother.

"Y-You know about that?" Astrid stuttered as a blush crept onto her cheeks.

"It's a small village, word gets around," Bertha replied, her smile growing as she watched her daughter's reaction, "I also hear that you helped him back to his house after he was injured in dragon training and had dinner with his family."

"Itâ€¦It was just his mom," Astrid argued weakly, averting her eyes as Bertha chuckled in amusement.

"Let me get straight to the point, have you taken a shine to Fishlegs?" Bertha questioned.

"Iâ€¦Iâ€¦don't really know. Maybe?" Astrid replied, her cheeks reddening by the second, "I've never really thought about it before. I've never cared about guys, dragon fighting was always more important than anything else."

"Well, I think the fact that you're thinking about it kind of shows that you have taken a liking to him," Bertha pointed out, her smile growing, "What do you like about the boy?"

"Ugh, you're starting to sound like Mrs. Ingerman, Mom," Astrid sighed as she rolled her eyes, "She pulled me aside after dinner and basically interrogated me about what I thought of Fishlegs."

"And what did you tell her?" Bertha pushed.

"He'sâ€¦well he's nice," Astrid replied with a shrug as she seemed to grow more comfortable discussing the subject, "He's one of the nicest guys I know. He's really smart and he can be very sweet when he wants to be, which seems to be most of the time. He's also surprisingly tough. I don't know, he's just so different from guys like Snotlout or Tuffnut. He's humble and caringâ€¦and I guess I like that."

"Ribbon told me you said something similar," Bertha stated with a nod.

"You already talked with Mrs. Ingerman?" Astrid asked in surprise.

"Of course, who else were me and Fishguts going to find about all of this from?" Bertha questioned, "Trust me, his father was just as

interested as I was."

"Oh gods," Astrid sighed as she placed her head in her hands, "I can only imagine what he's going through right now."

Meanwhile,

"Show it to me again," Fishguts insisted, sitting on the edge of his chair in his parlor. Fishlegs obliged by pulling up his pant leg to show the faded red markings on his skin from where the Timberjack had burnt him.

"I don't know why you keep on insisting on looking at that awful mark," Ribbon sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose as she sat in her rocking chair.

"Scars and burns are a sign of a true Viking warrior," Fishguts explained as he laughed happily, "It's shown you've been bloodied in combat and come out the victor. They remind us of our victories."

"All it reminds me of is how that terrible dragon almost took his leg," Ribbon stated, cringing at the burn until Fishlegs pushed his pant leg back down.

"Bah, what do you know?" Fishguts replied, waving his hand dismissively at his wife, "It's a shame you didn't get a scar from fighting that Gronckle by yourself."

"If I had, I would have probably lost an arm or something," Fishlegs replied with a nervous laugh, not used to receiving so much praise from his father.

"Never slowed Gobber down, the half-breed bastard!" Fishguts laughed uproariously, "We should let him train all the new recruits, he's worked wonders with you!"

"Thanks, Dad," Fishlegs replied, a note of confusion in his voice, "I think."

"I'll be honest with you, son, I didn't see these dragon fighting lessons going well for you," Fishguts said, "You've just never had that Viking spirit, you know? Or at least I thought you didn't, but boy, was I wrong!"

Standing up, Fishguts pulled his son into a one armed hug, laughing loudly as he ruffled Fishlegs hair, causing Fishlegs to grin.

"Wait one second, I have something for you," Fishguts stated before heading into a back room of the house. Fishlegs gave his mother a questioning look to see if she knew what Fishguts was up to, but Ribbon only smiled and shrugged.

"Here it is!" they heard Fishguts exclaim before he came walking back in with a two-handed warhammer in his hands. The head was made of thick and heavy iron while the handle was wrapped in sturdy leather.

"Hey, that's the warhammer you had me pick up from Gobber's shop a while ago," Fishlegs commented as he pointed at the hammer.

"Indeed it is, and I'll admit, I lied to you," Fishguts explained with a grin, "This wasn't for me. It's for you."

"For me?" Fishlegs asked in surprise.

"Yep. I figured you had outgrown that old, stone hammer of yours, so I had Gobber make you this!" Fishguts explained as he held the hammer out for Fishlegs to take, "I was saving it for when I thought you were ready, and you're definitely ready now."

Slowly, Fishlegs reach out and took the hammer in his hands. It was heavy, easily the heaviest weapon Fishlegs had ever held, but nothing he couldn't handle.

"If you knocked that Gronckle for a loop with your little stone hammer, wait until it gets a load of this!" Fishguts said excitedly, "You'll probably cave its head in with one swing!"

The thought of cracking the Gronckle's head open, or any dragon's for that matter, sent a shiver down his spine, and not the way father would have approved of.

"Thanks, Dad," Fishlegs said as he looked over the hammer, "I don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything, son. I'm happy to give it to you," Fishguts replied with a beaming smile as he placed a hand on Fishlegs' shoulder, "Now you're a proper Viking, and you can stop hanging around with those reject friends of yours."

"What did you say?" Fishlegs asked, narrowing his eyes as his head snapped up to look at his father.

"Oh no," Ribbon whispered in dismay, covering her mouth with her already twitching hands.

"Come on, son, you have to know that that useless excuse for a Viking and his Highlander brat are only holding you back," Fishguts explained, seemingly sure that his son was on his side.

"Dad, Hiccup and Merida have been doing just as well as me in the arena, if not better," Fishlegs argued, his grip tightening around the handle of his hammer.

"Oh, like I'm going to believe that," Fishguts laughed dismissively, "Gobber's obviously trying to puff up how well the two losers are doing so that Stoick will be pleased and he can look better to the rest of the village."

"Are you kidding me!?" Fishlegs asked incredulously, "You literally just said how good of a job he did with training me!"

"That's different, you always had potential. You just needed someone to bring it out!" Fishguts argued, growing more agitated as the conversation went.

"Even if that was true, there's still the fact that all sorts of other people saw them doing well," Fishlegs shot back, gesturing to his mother, "Including Mom!"

"Hiccup's really a good boy if you give him a chance," Ribbon added pleadingly, "And Princess Merida is such a sweet girl."

"You stay out of this!" Fishguts said threateningly, whirling around and pointing a finger at his wife so violently it caused her to jump back in alarm.

"Don't talk to her like that!" Fishlegs shouted as he pointed the warhammer at his father.

"Are you threatening me!?" Fishguts roared, leaning down and glaring at his son, ignoring the hammerhead inches from his face, "In my own home!? With a weapon I gave you!?"

"Yeah, I suppose I am," Fishlegs growled back, unphased by his father's anger, "I'm not going to just stand here and let you bad mouth my friends. Or my mother."

"Well, this is my house and I do as I please in it!" Fishguts snarled, "So, if you don't like it, maybe you should leave!"

"You know what, that sounds like a pretty good idea!" Fishlegs shouted back as he rested the hammer on his shoulder and began making his way towards the door, "I think I will!"

"Fishlegs wait!" Ribbon cried as she held a hand out in a futile attempt to stop him but the only answer she received was the door slamming as Fishlegs left the house. A sad look crossed Ribbon's face before almost immediately being replaced with a look of anger as she glared up at her husband.

"Now look what you've done!" she shouted as she pushed herself out of her rocking chair.

"What I've done!?" Fishguts roared, beginning a shouting match that followed Fishlegs down the hill towards the center of the village, away from his house. Fishlegs grumbled angrily to himself and glared at the earth beneath his feet as if it had given him personal offence.

After a minute, he came to a stop next to one of the many cliffside that made up the geography of the village. Taking his new warhammer into both hands, Fishlegs visibly and quietly seethed for a few moments before letting out a shout of frustration and slamming the hammerhead against the cliffside with all the strength he could muster. Iron met stone with a thunderous boom, cracking the rock and shooting a cloud of dust into Fishlegs' face, but he paid it no mind. The force of the blow knocked a few rocks and pebbles loose higher up the cliff and they rained like hail around the indifferent form of Fishlegs.

Fishlegs sighed loudly, more anger than strength spent in his assault on the rock. Calmly he shouldered the warhammer as his face shifted from anger to sadness. His father's anger was a hot one, burning out as quickly as it came. Fishlegs had no doubt he would be allowed back into the house by tomorrow, maybe even with a half hearted apology from his father forced by his mother. The big question was if he even wanted to go back, seeing how strained his relationship with his father was going. There was a question that was bigger still

though.

"Now where do I go?" Fishlegs asked himself with a sigh. He could always go to Hiccup's. Hiccup and Merida would gladly take him in and Fishlegs knew the chief would allow him to stay, especially if Stoick knew the reason Fishlegs had left his home in the middle of the night. But even if they were nice about it, Fishlegs would be a bother and he hated the idea of being a bother. What he needed was some time to think. He needed someone to talk to who he also wouldn't burden with his problems.

Looking out over the village, Fishlegs saw the arena, sitting dark and empty as it did every night. His thoughts turned to the dragons being held in their pens inside. Specifically, his thoughts turned to one dragon in particular.

"Don't be stupid," Fishlegs whispered angrily to himself, "It's a wild dragon, one that has a reason to hate me."

But Toothless had reason to hate Hiccup, and now look at them. Merida and Boudica too. In his mind, Fishlegs could still hear the Gronckle purring softly as him as he rubbed its nose with sweetgrass. Maybe. Just maybe.

Snapping out of his thoughts, Fishlegs realized that his feet had unwittingly taken him down to the arena, stopping before the portcullis that blocked the entrance into the ring. A pensive look formed on Fishlegs' features as he took a few moments to think. When he was done, he nodded his head resolutely and pulled on the crank to open the portcullis, slipping under it and silently closing it behind him so he would not be discovered.

Making his way across the arena, he could hear the dragons begin stirring in their pens as they sensed him approaching. Ignoring the threatening growls and hisses, as well as the curious chirping coming from Boudica's pen, Fishlegs made his way directly to the door behind which he knew the Gronckle was.

"All right, Fishlegs," he said to himself as he approached the door, "You can do this."

He heard the sound of claws scraping on stone and a low growl as he pressed his ear to the thick wooden door.

"Well, I guess you're awake," Fishlegs stated as he gulped nervously. Turning his head, he looked at the release lever for the door. Taking a calming breath, he reached out and pulled it down, quickly backing away as the door unlocked with a loud clank. There was a tense moment where nothing seemed to happen. Then, slowly, the door was nudged open and the Gronckle peeked its head out, glancing around the arena wearily. Eventually, its eyes fell on Fishlegs and it let out a quick growl before quieting again as it looked closer at him.

"H-Hey," Fishlegs greeted the dragon nervously, gripping his hammer tightly as the Gronckle completely left its pen and began to waddle towards him, sniffing the air as it went, "I guess you remember me, huh?"

The Gronckle growled wearily at him, eyeing Fishlegs' warhammer as it sniffed the air again.

"Oh, right," Fishlegs said as he glanced down at his warhammer before tossing the heavy weapon as far away as he could and held his empty hands up towards the dragon, the iron hammerhead clattering against the stone ground, "There, see. No weapons."

This seemed to pacify the Gronckle as it approached him cautiously its eyes watching him wearily while it continued to sniff at the air. As it got closer, the Gronckle moved its head so it could sniff at Fishlegs' right hand.

"Oh," Fishlegs said with a nervous chuckle as the Gronckle sniffed at his arm, "I guess you're looking for some sweetgrass, huh? I didn't really think to bring any but my mom did put some on the food she made me today, so maybe you're smelling a bit of that."

As he talked, Fishlegs held his right hand out more so that the Gronckle could better smell it. Taking some more curious sniffs, the Gronckle put its nose right into Fishlegs' hand, purring happily as it seemed to try and sniff all of the sweetgrass scent out of the Viking's hand.

Chuckling to himself, Fishlegs reached out with his other hand and tried to pat the dragon on the side of its head. The Gronckle started and let out a low growl as it quickly backed away from him.

"Sorry," Fishlegs apologized as he quickly pulled his hands back to himself, "Sorry."

The Gronckle studied Fishlegs wearily for a few moments, grumbling as it did. After another moment of carefully study, the Gronckle barked at Fishlegs before rolling to the side. Fishlegs watched in surprise as the Gronckle pushed itself back to its feet before looking expectantly at the Viking. Confused, Fishlegs stood where he was, not understanding what the Gronckle was trying to do. This seemed to annoy the dragon and after a moment the Gronckle growled at Fishlegs before barking and rolling again. As the Gronckle pushed itself to its feet again and glared at Fishlegs in expectation.

"Do you want me to roll?" Fishlegs questioned, to which the Gronckle barked in reply and made a rolling motion with its head.

"Okay," Fishlegs said with a shrug, before getting down on his hands and knees and then rolled across the ground.

"How was that?" Fishlegs asked as he began to push himself to his feet but stopped when the Gronckle barked angrily at him again and made another rolling motion with its head.

"Oh, right, twice," Fishlegs said in realization before quickly rolling again. At this, the Gronckle let out a happy bark before rolling again, which Fishlegs quickly mimicked. Every time Fishlegs rolled across the hard stone floor of the arena, the Gronckle would do so again, the dragon and the Viking teen continuously circling each other as they rolled, Fishlegs starting to laugh as they went. Without noticing it, Fishlegs and the Gronckle were drawing closer and closer together until after a roll, Fishlegs suddenly found himself on his hands and knees directly in front of the Gronckle.

Watching him, the Gronckle quickly scurried to the right, which Fishlegs mimicked as well. It then went to the left, Fishlegs following it all the way. The following few moments were filled with Fishlegs copying every little movement the Gronckle did, including leaning so close together that their noses touched. Then, just as suddenly as it began, the Gronckle stopped as they lay on their backs again, looking at Fishlegs like it was expecting him to do something.

A confused look on his face, Fishlegs rolled over and pushed himself to his hands and knees the Gronckle watching him the entire time. After another moment, Fishlegs pushed himself to his feet and still the Gronckle merely watched him, lying on its back with its belly exposed. Walking over to the Gronckle's side, Fishlegs stood above it, the dragon looking up at him. It was then that it all clicked in Fishlegs' brain and he smiled. Leaning down, he reached out with one hand and began scratching the Gronckle's belly. The Gronckle purred in delight, urging Fishlegs to reach out and scratch it with both hands. The Gronckle groaned happily and one of its hind legs began to kick uncontrollably, causing Fishlegs' smile to grow as a laugh escaped his throat.

After a moment, Fishlegs was forced to stop as the Gronckle rolled back to its feet. The dragon took a long sniff of Fishlegs' face before opening its cavernous mouth, sticking out its tongue and giving Fishlegs a long lick.

"Ew," Fishlegs said with a laugh as he wiped the saliva off of his cheek, "Dragon kisses."

Smiling, Fishlegs reached out and patted the Gronckle on the head, eliciting a satisfied grumble from the dragon.

"I guess I'm going to have to think up a name for you now," Fishlegs mused as he scratched the Gronckle's head, "But what to call you?"

Fishlegs thought for a moment, rubbing his chin pensively with one hand as he scratched the Gronckle with the other. As he thought, Fishlegs remembered the day he had first met this particular Gronckle. Specifically, something Fishlegs had heard Merida call the Gronckle while he was fighting it.

"Well you are a bit of a lug," Fishlegs commented with a smile, "How about Meatlug?"

The Gronckle barked happily, licking at Fishlegs' face again.

"Alright then," Fishlegs said with a laugh, "Meatlug it is."

A/N: Another fun chapter to write, I liked getting the chance to show more interaction between certain characters as well as flesh out the world a tiny bit more. Plus I liked getting to give Fishlegs some more focus. Hope you guys liked it too! As always, critiques and feedback is always welcome so please review! Later!

****Chapter 26: Champions****

Fishlegs grumbled as the sun fell across his eyes. For a moment, he tried to resist the light calling him back to the waking world, but it ultimately proved futile. Grumbling, he pushed himself into a sitting position, the hay that stuck to his back falling off as he worked his arms. Giving a loud yawn, Fishlegs stood up from the stone covered ground and stretched his arms above his head. As he did, his bedmate stirred.

Meatlug groaned as he, or she, Fishlegs wasn't sure because he hadn't quite picked up on what made his friends so certain about the genders of their dragons, stirred. The Gronckle gave itself a quick shake before focusing on Fishlegs, smiling as it waddled over to him.

"Morning," Fishlegs greeted with a smile as he patted Meatlug on the head, earning a happy purr from the Gronckle, "I have to say, I never expected to spend the night-"

The sound of voices past the walls of the arena caused Fishlegs to stop mid-sentence. Pausing, Fishlegs listened, a look of fear growing on his face as he realized that the voices were growing louder and closer.

"Someone's coming!" Fishlegs hissed in panic before turning to look at Meatlug, who seemed to be oblivious to any sort of approaching danger, "We have to get you back in your pen!"

Fishlegs quickly spun around and began pushing on Meatlug, trying to urge the Gronckle back into its pen, the dragon crumbling in confusion. Eventually, Fishlegs was able to urge and push Meatlug into its pen and seal it just as the portcullis began to open. A second later, Gobber entered the arena with the rest of the students in tow.

"An' then Ahâ€|" Gobber began to say but he trailed off as he came to a stop, the teens coming to a halt with him as they all stared in confusion. Before them, standing at the center of the arena, was Fishlegs, swinging his warhammer back and forth, grunting loudly with every swing.

"Oh, hey guys," Fishlegs said, shouldering his hammer and acting like he had only just noticed them all.

"What are you doing, Fishlegs?" Astrid asked with a bemused expression.

"Just getting a feel for my new hammer," Fishlegs replied with a shrug, earning a smirk from Astrid. As the others began to fan out and prepare themselves for Gobber's final challenge, Hiccup and Merida approached Fishlegs with concerned looks on their faces.

"Hey buddy," Hiccup greeted Fishlegs with a hesitant smile, "We heard about what happened with your dad. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," Fishlegs whispered with a sigh, his face falling slightly, glancing up at Hiccup's new helmet, "Nice helmet."

"Where did ye gae?" Merida questioned with concern, "Where did ye sleep?"

"Iâ€¦I slept here," Fishlegs mumbled.

"â€¦What do you mean you slept here?" Hiccup asked in confusion.

"I slept here," Fishlegs repeated, scratching the back of his head nervously, "â€¦In the Gronckle's pen."

"You slept in the Gronckle's pen!?" Hiccup whispered harshly.

"How?" Merida added.

"Iâ€¦made friends with him," Fishlegs explained with a shrug, "Or her, I really haven't figured that out yet."

"Fishlegs that's amazing," Hiccup stated, a smile growing on his face.

"How did ye dae it?" Merida questioned as people began to file into the stands above them.

"I'll tell you guys later," Fishlegs said as he saw Gobber gathering the teens around him, "Looks like we're starting soon."

Looking up, Hiccup could see the stands were being packed with the people of the village. His father was making his way towards the raised dais where he and other important people, such as Gothi and Spitelout. Looking around the stands he saw the rest of the teens' families moving into the stands. As he looked, some movement caught his attention. Glancing, he saw Ribbon Ingerman waving to him from the stands, her husband standing glumly next to her. Looking at her, he saw her signaling for him to get Fishlegs' attention. Smiling, Hiccup nodded and turned to look at Fishlegs.

"Hey," he said, tapping Fishlegs on the shoulder to get his attention, before pointing up into the stands, "It's your parents."

Looking up at the stands, Fishlegs paled slightly as he saw his parents. Ribbon gave him a smile and an enthusiastic wave while Fishguts crossed his arms and looked away grumpily. Seeing this, Ribbon glared at her husband before elbowing him in the side. Fishguts let out a grunt of surprise and annoyance and he turned to say something to Ribbon, but it died in his throat when he saw the look she was giving him. Reluctantly, Fishguts turned to look at Fishlegs and gave his son a small wave. Fishlegs grinned as he waved back.

"Looks like yer mum talked some sense intae yer da," Merida commented with a smirk.

"She's tougher than she looks," Fishlegs replied as the three of them moved to join the other teens.

"Alright, gather round!" Gobber called, signaling the teens to gather round him, "We're aboot tae begin yer final lesson."

A hush fell over the group and the crowd as a smile slowly spread

across Gobber's face.

"Our time taegether is almost at its end an' Ah hae tae say, ye lot are th' best dragon fighters Ah hae ever had th' pleasure o' trainin'," Gobber said with a beaming smile, "Ah'm honored tae hae been yer teacher."

"I think I speak for everyone when I say we're honored to have been your students, Gobber," Astrid spoke up, earning nods from the other teens.

"Och, ye lot are gaein' tae make me all weepy in front o' th' whole village if ye keep 'at talk up," Gobber said, wiping one of his eyes as the teens chuckled, "Anyway, Ah jist wanted tae wish ye all th' best o' luck. Make th' village proud."

The teens smiled and nodded before moving away from Gobber to take up positions and prepare for what faced them. As they did, Hiccup noticed Snotlout walking up to him.

"Hey, Hiccup!" he called out before stopping in front of his cousin, "Any uh, chance I could have a, you know, word with, uh, you?"

Hiccup raised a curious and confused eyebrow at Snotlout, glancing at Fishlegs and Merida, who could only shrug as they looked at Snotlout suspiciously.

"Uh, sure," Hiccup said, taking a few steps away from the others to give him and his cousin some privacy, "What did you want to talk about?"

"Well, I talked to my dad last night, about all the stuff that's been happening since he left with your dad," Snotlout explained nervously.

"And?" Hiccup urged.

"And he wasn'tâ€¦you knowâ€¦happy," Snotlout admitted with a sigh.

"Why not?" Hiccup asked with surprise.

"He thinks that I should be doing better," Snotlout admitted, turning his eyes to the ground, "Better than you at least."

"Ohâ€¦I see," Hiccup replied awkwardly.

"Look man, I know you and I haven't ever really gotten along," Snotlout stated with another sigh, "And that's more on me than it is on you. You're a better Viking than I ever gave you credit for."

"Wow, thanks Snotlout," Hiccup said in surprise, "I don't know what to say."

"Well, I was hoping there was something you could do for me," Snotlout stated.

"What's that?" Hiccup questioned.

"I was hoping you could let me take the lead on this," Snotlout said, "I mean, it'sâ€¦it's obvious I'm not going to be judged the best, so this is my last chance to prove myself to my dad."

Hearing Snotlout's explanation, Hiccup turned to look up at the stands. Sitting next to Stoick was his uncle Spitelout, who was practically glaring down at the cousins. Hiccup held his gaze for a moment before turning back towards Snotlout.

"Ok, you take the lead," Hiccup stated with a smile and a nod.

"Really!?" Snotlout asked with a beaming smile. When Hiccup smirked and nodded in reply, Snotlout let out a whoop of joy and excitement as he punched his cousin friendlily in the arm. Hiccup forced a smile as he rubbed his bruised arm.

"Man, I take back everything I said about you," Snotlout said excitedly, "You're way cooler than I ever gave you credit for."

"Thanks?" Hiccup replied to which Snotlout only grinned as he moved away and prepared for the lesson to start. Merida had a bemused smile on her face as she and Fishlegs walked over to where Hiccup was standing.

"Whit was 'at about?" Merida questioned, glancing in the direction Snotlout had gone in.

"Snotlout wanted to, I don't know, take the lead?" Hiccup replied with a shrug, "He wanted to impress his dad. Don't know why he had to ask me though."

"Because ye're th' ane who usually takes th' lead," Merida stated, smirking at Hiccup as she placed a hand on her hip.

"What?" Hiccup scoffed as they moved into position with the others, "No I'm not."

"So Hiccup," Tuffnut spoke up as they approached the other teens, "What's the plan?"

Hiccup had the good grace to glance at Merida with an embarrassed look on his face as she smiled triumphantly at him while Fishlegs snickered.

"Umâ€¦Well, I'm not sure," Hiccup answered quickly with a shrug, "But I think that Snotlout might have an idea of what to do."

With that, the other teens turned and looked at Snotlout expectedly. The young Viking seemed to freeze, his eyes going wide as he realized everyone was expecting him to have a plan right then and there.

"Umâ€¦well I was thinkingâ€¦" Snotlout mumbled, clearly uncomfortable with being put on the spot, "We surround the dragon, and, here me out nowâ€¦hit itâ€¦a lot."

There was a dead silence as the other teens stared at

Snotlout.

"Genius," Astrid deadpanned with a roll of her eyes.

Before anyone could say anything more, Gobber drew attention to himself.

"Alright, it's time we get started!" he announced, as he stepped in front of the doors holding the dragons in their pens, "For yer last lesson, Ah'm gaein' tae add a bit o' a twist."

The teens looked at each other uneasily.

"Ye've learned how tae face each an' every ane o' th' dragons we hae in our possession an' ye've bested them all," he said before a smile crept across his face, "Individually, at least."

"Oh boy," Hiccup whispered, knowing exactly where Gobber was going with this.

"In real life, ye wonae hae th' luxury o' fightin' dragons ane at a time," Gobber continued, "Sae yer lesson taeday will be aboot how tae fight more than ane."

"Ye daenae thinkâ€|?" Merida whispered cautiously.

"I really hope not," Hiccup replied, his face uncertain.

"Now, Ah daenae want tae overwhelm ye lot with this sae we'll dae saemethin' easy," Gobber said as he reached up for a lever the teens hadn't seen him use before, "How aboot a Gronckle an' a Nadder tae start?"

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Hiccup grouched before Gobber pulled the lever, causing the two doors to swing open, releasing Meatlug and Boudica. The two dragons wandered out of their pens, sniffing the air curiously.

"What do we do!?" Fishlegs whispered in a high pitched, panicked voice.

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking," Hiccup replied quickly, watching nervously as the two dragons looked at the gathered teens curiously while the others began to cautiously edge towards the Gronckle and Nadder, weapons at the ready, "We should be fine as long as nobody does anything stupid."

"Let's get them!" Snotlout shouted, waving his mace around before charging the dragons with a war cry.

"Like 'at?" Merida deadpanned, cocking an eyebrow.

"Yeah, like that," Hiccup replied with a sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"What should we do!?" Fishlegs asked again.

"Right now, I guess we just make sure they don't kill one another," Hiccup replied before motioning for Merida and Fishlegs to follow him.

Snoutlout roared as he charged at Boudica. He swung his mace at her head, but Boudica quickly pulled back, completely avoiding the attack. Boudica snarled and snapped at Snotlout with her teeth, forcing the young man to take a step back. As Snotlout stumbled back, Boudica advanced on him, roaring loudly as she extended her wings threateningly. Jumping forward, Boudica tried to bite Snotlout again, but he was saved when Hiccup ran up and grabbed his cousin by the arm, before he managed to yank the larger boy out of the way as the Nadder's jaws slammed shut.

"This is your plan!?" Hiccup exclaimed as he and Snotlout stumbled back.

"Okay, I'm not really a plan guy, I admit it," Snotlout replied, "But in my defense, it seemed like a good idea at the time."

Hiccup stared at Snotlout like that was the single stupidest thing that he had ever heard. Hiccup looked like he was going to say something but before he could, their attention was brought back to Boudica as the dragon shrieked at them again as she began to advance on them.

"Oi!" Merida called, before clicking her tongue, causing Boudica's head to snap around to look at her, "Over here!"

Chirping with curiosity, Boudica began to follow Merida, noticeably relaxing as the Highlander pretended to be in more danger than she really was, huffing and puffing as she ran away, the Nadder chasing her in an almost playful manner.

"Hiccup look out!" the young man heard Tuffnut cried, before he spun around, seeing Meatlug divebombing towards them.

"Crap!" Snotlout shouted as they both jumped out of the way, the Gronckle buzzing by, kicking up dust off the stone floor as it flew by. Wheeling into the air, Meatlug rose up and turned back around, scanning the arena to look for another target. Before Meatlug could do anything, Fishlegs caught the Gronckle's attention by hopping up and down while waving his hands above his head. Curious, Meatlug landed on the ground, sniffing the area around Fishlegs as he cautiously approached the young man.

"Okay, you got its attention," Fishlegs said to himself, cautiously backing away from Meatlug feeling everyone in the stands' eyes on him, "Now what?"

Fishlegs began to juke about, playing at attacking Meatlug but always jumping back before he attacked the Gronckle. Eventually though, Meatlug got so worked up that the Gronckle raised up on its back legs, moving to playfully pounce on Fishlegs, causing the young man's eyes to go wide in fear and surprise.

"Uh oh," he whispered quietly to himself, frozen in place.

"Fishlegs, look out!" he heard Astrid shout before she slammed into his side, knocking him to the ground and sending the two of them rolling away as Meatlug pounced onto the spot where Fishlegs had been standing a moment before. The two Viking teens rolled to a stop a few

feet away with Astrid laying on Fishlegs' chest.

"Fishlegs, what are you doing!?" Astrid demanded as she pounded on his chest with an open hand, causing him to hiss in pain, "Wake up!"

"S-Sorry!" Fishlegs replied as Astrid quickly pushed herself to her feet and helped Fishlegs to his.

"Seriously, Hiccup," Astrid said, whirling around to look at the other boy as Meatlug began to move towards her and Fishlegs, "What's the plan!?"

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking!" Hiccup shouted back, watching as Merida continued to dance away from Boudica, the Nadder hopping playfully behind her, "There's got to be a way out of this."

As he watched both Meatlug and Boudica chase the teens around, an idea came to Hiccup.

"We don't have to fight them if we can get them to fight one another," Hiccup whispered to himself before looking at the others, "I have a plan!"

"About time!" Tuffnut shouted, dodging out of the way as Merida ran by, Boudica hot on her tail.

"What do we do!?" Ruffnut questioned, hopping away as Meatlug buzzed past her.

"We need to lead them into one another!" Hiccup replied, "Like with the Zippleback!"

"Got it!" Astrid shouted back, before turning her attention towards Meatlug, "Hey! Over here you big, stupid lizard!"

Meatlug whipped his head around to look at Astrid, growling as his eyes narrowed at her. Roaring, the Gronckle charged at Astrid who quickly turned on her heel and raced away. Opening his cavernous mouth, Meatlug shot a fireball at her, forcing her to jump forward as the fire licked at her boots.

At the same time, Merida was running at full tilt with Boudica right on her heels. Seeing Astrid running from Meatlug, Merida changed her direction towards her. As they ran towards one another, their eyes narrowed in determination as their gazes locked.

"Up!" Astrid shouted as she picked up speed.

"Doon!" Merida called back, running faster as well.

As they reached each other Astrid leapt as high as she could while Merida slid to the ground, skidding across the stone floor of the arena. Merida managed to slide right under Meatlug, the Gronckle looking down at her in surprise. At the same time, Astrid managed to jump up to face level with Boudica. Reaching out with her foot, Astrid planted it on Boudica's face, pushing off the Nadder's nose and flipping over her, rolling across the ground as she landed. Boudica looked over shoulder to watch Astrid in surprise, leaving both dragons distracted and unable to react before they slammed into

each other at full force.

The dragons fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs, roaring and snarling at one another as they tried to pull away. The teens began to gather around the two dragons as Boudica snarled at Meatlug, raising her tail and shaking it threateningly at the Gronckle, who scratched the ground and snorted at the Nadder.

"Now what do we do?" Fishlegs questioned, looking at Hiccup.

"Astrid, you took out that Timberjack by scratching it right?" Hiccup asked as Meatlug nipped at Boudica.

"Yeah, on its back. Why?" Astrid replied, raising an eyebrow at Hiccup.

"What if other types of dragons have weak points like that as well?" Hiccup answered as Boudica swung her tail at Meatlug.

"So, what? You want us to scratch their backs?" Snotlout questioned in confusion, throwing his hands up in the air.

"Basically," Hiccup admitted with an awkward smirk and a shrug, "It might not be on their backs though."

"This is crazy," Snotlout pointed out with a shake of his head as the two dragons roared at one another.

"We've done crazier," Tuffnut replied with a shrug.

"Besides, I don't hear you coming up with any better ideas," Ruffnut stated, giving Snotlout a pointed look.

"Fine," Snotlout says in defeat, "Like I said, I'm not much of an idea guy anyway."

"You are an attack guy though," Hiccup countered, "Want to lead us in?"

A smile spread across Snotlout's face as he looked at his cousin.

"Oh, you know it," Snotlout replied with a chuckle.

"Ok, let's do this," Hiccup said with a smile.

"Let's get them!" Snotlout shouted, waving his mace above his head before charging at the squabbling dragons, the other teens quickly following suit.

"Ye think this is a good idea?" Merida asked Hiccup as they ran towards the dragons.

"It's the only way I can think of that we can get out of this without hurting the dragons or revealing our connection to them," Hiccup replied quiet enough so only she could hear.

"Ah jist hope this works," Merida stated as they neared the dragons.

"Me too," Hiccup replied grimly.

As the teens reached the dragons, Snotlout was the first to strike, leaping up onto Boudica's back, catching the Nadder by surprise. Snotlout held on tight to the spines on Boudica's back as the Nadder thrashed around, attempting to buck him off. While Meatlug was distracted by the antics happening in front of it, the twins suddenly leapt upon its back as well, holding on tight as the Gronckle began to thrash around.

"Okay, I'm on the dragon, now what!?" Snotlout shouted as he held onto Boudica for dear life.

"Try scratching it between the wings!" Astrid called as she tried to find a way to approach the Nadder without being hit by its thrashing.

Nodding in understanding, Snotlout reached back and tried scratching between Boudica's rapidly beating wings. After a few seconds of frantic scratching, Snotlout looked back at the others with a panicked expression.

"It's not working!" he shouted, barely managing to hold on as Boudica continued to thrash about.

"Same here!" Tuffnut called out as he and his sister scratched uselessly at Meatlug's back.

"Try scratching somewhere else!" Hiccup called as he hopped forward and tried scratching Meatlug's shoulder before jumping away as the Gronckle snapped its jaws at him.

"Try scratching somewhere they usually wouldn't be touched!" Merida shouted as she approached Boudica and tried to scratch the Nadder's belly, but had to move out of the way as the dragon almost stepped on her.

Reaching down, Ruffnut began scratching at Meatlug's neck. Suddenly, she hit a spot right under its jaw. Meatlug seemed to seize up, freezing in place before collapsing to the ground, knocking the twins off its back. The Gronckle lay upon the ground, purring happily with a large smile on its face, its tongue hanging loosely from its open mouth.

"Snotlout!" Ruffnut cried out to catch the boy's attention, "Try scratching it under its chin!"

Nodding, Snotlout reached down and scratched under Boudica's chin, struggling to stay on the Nadder's back. As soon as Snotlout scratched the right spot, Boudica seized up before collapsing to the ground, knocking Snotlout off her back as she lay peacefully on the ground.

"It worked!" Snotlout exclaimed happily as he hopped back to his feet and threw his hands into the air in triumph as the crowd in the stands began to cheer.

Hiccup looked up at the stands, a smile creeping across his face as he saw the cheering villagers. He first caught sight of Fishlegs'

parents. Ribbon was applauding ecstatically, hoping up and down while Fishguts had a barely perceptible smirk on his face as he clapped his large hands. Hiccup eyes next fell on Spitelout, who was on his feet, a proud smile on his face as he clapped his hands, his eyes focused on his son. Finally, Hiccup looked at his own father. He found Stoick on his feet, booming laughter escaping his throat as he clapped his large hands thunderously.

"Ye did it!" Gobber shouted with joy, racing over to teens as they gathered together as fast as his peg leg would carry him, "Ah knew ye cud dae it! Ye crazy lot always find a way tae surprise me."

"We couldn't have done it without your teaching, Gobber," Astrid replied as the other teens nodded in agreement.

"Ye're all too kind," Gobber stated, whipping his eyes as they started to water. As they talked the crowd began to quiet down, causing the group to turn their attention back to the stands, where they saw Gothi stepping forward, everyone's attention focusing on her.

"It's time fer th' choosin'," Gobber whispered as he gathered the teens together in a line and stepped behind them. As the arena grew completely quiet Gothi nodded to Gobber. Nodding in return, Gobber stepped behind Astrid and pointed to her. Gothi shook her head and Gobber smiled and pointed at Hiccup. His face fell when Gothi shook her head again. Confused, Gobber pointed to Merida, receiving another shake of the head. One by one, he indicated to each of the teens and received a no in reply. The villagers in the audience began to shift uncomfortably and murmur to each other in confusion.

"Gothi, Ah daenae understand," Gobber questioned, throwing his hands up in confusion, "Ane o' them has tae be th' champion."

"Yes, there must be at least one champion in every class," Gothi replied with a sagely nod.

"At least?" Gobber questioned, raising an eyebrow in confusion.

"Yes, while for every dragon training class there must be a champion, it has been stated that if multiple students show equally great skill, they all can be selected as champions," Gothi explained.

"Sae, which ane o' them are th' champions?" Gobber questioned.

Holding her arms out, she swept them in front of herself as she smiled knowingly.

"They all are," she said simply, causing gasps of shock and rapid talk amongst the audience. The teens' eyes went wide with surprise and began looking at one another to see each other's reactions. Gobber meanwhile was utterly gob smacked, his jaw hanging open in shock.

"Are ye sure about this, Gothi?" Stoick questioned cautiously, rising to his feet and approaching the elder, "Nothin' like this has ever happened before."

"There's a first time for everything," Gothi replied, shooting Stoick a smirk before turning her attention back to the teens, "These seven young warriors have each proven themselves individually. But more importantly, they have proven themselves as a team. Never before have I seen a group of Vikings work so well together, especially when they started out at such odds."

Astrid glanced at Merida as Gothi spoke, the princess meeting her gaze and giving the blonde a small smile. At the same time, Hiccup glanced over at Snotlout, who had enough sense to look embarrassed as he looked back at his cousin.

"As such, for your victories both in the arena and outside of it, I name you all champions!" Gothi declared, causing the crowd to applaud wildly, "The honor of killing the Nightmare belongs to all of you!"

Hearing the words sent a shock through Hiccup as the realization hit him. He would have to take part in killing a dragon. Something he couldn't possibly bring himself to do now. Everything seemed to slow down, the sound of the crowd cheering replaced by his heart thundering in his ears. Looking over, he saw Ruff and Astrid hugging each other as they laughed happily while Snotlout and Tuff bumped chests. Looking over at Fishlegs, he could see his friend was having the same realization as the large teen stared blankly at Meatlug and Boudica lying peacefully on the ground. Turning, he looked at Merida, meeting her gaze as she looked at him. She was paler than he had ever seen her and he was hit with the sudden worry that she might throw up then and there. Before he could even think of what to do, a powerful smack on his back brought him rushing back to reality.

"Ye did it, lad!" Gobber shouted joyously before reaching down and scooping Hiccup up to pull him into a bone crushing hug, "Ye did it!"

"Y-Yeahâ€¦" Hiccup replied, his voice uneasy, "Iâ€¦I guess I did."

"Oh, but nae jist ye!" Gobber stated as he reached down and grabbed Merida as well, startling the red head, causing her to squeak in surprise as she was lifted off her feet, "We cannae forget about ye, Princess!"

"Ahâ€¦Ah cudnae hae done it withoot ye, Gobber," Merida said after a moment, her wide, blue eyes still focused on Hiccup.

"Gobber!" Stoick shouted, causing the blacksmith to spin around. It was only then that Hiccup realized the arena was quickly filling up with people coming in to congratulate the teens, his father quickly making his way over to them.

"Gobber, put my boy down!" Stoick ordered, to which Gobber could only laugh in reply as he set Hiccup and Merida back down.

"Thanks, Dad," Hiccup said as he tried to steady himself on his feet, "For a second there I thought Gobber was going to-"

"Come here, my boy!" Stoick exclaimed as he reached down and picked Hiccup up, pulling him into another hug.

"Okay then," Hiccup said in reply, looking thoroughly uncomfortable as his father hugged him.

"Hiccup, I've never been more proud of ye than I am now," Stoick said as he set his son back on his feet, Merida reaching out to help steady him, "I'm still trying to figure out what ye and the others pulled in here, but whatever it was, it was a thing of beauty."

"Th-thanks, Dad," Hiccup replied, blushing under his father's praise.

"Gods, a whole class named champion!" Stoick shouted happily, laughing as he did, "And all lead by my son! My boy!"

Kneeling down, Stoick beamed at Hiccup as he placed his large hands on his son's shoulders.

"Your mother would be so proud," he added quietly, giving Hiccup's shoulders a squeeze. Hiccup could only advert his gaze, Stoick blind to his son's inner turmoil as he turned his attention towards Merida.

"And you!" Stoick yelled, startling Merida as he reached for her, "Don't think I forgot about you!"

"Oh please daenae," Merida whispered in dismay, but her plea fell on deaf ears as Stoick scooped her up and pulled her into a hug.

"What?" Stoick questioned with a laugh, as he set her back down, "I can't give my only daughter-in-law a hug?"

"Ah-Ah'm nae yer daughter-in-law yet," Merida corrected as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, "Me an' Hiccup haenae been married yet."

"A minor detail," Stoick replied dismissively, "Ye've already taken the most important step. I told ye if ye completed this trainin' ye'd be part of our tribe. Ye've surpassed even my wildest dreams and expectations. Ye might have Highlander blood in your veins but you're a Viking of Berk now, Merida, in the gods' eyes and mine."

Merida didn't know what to say, overcome by the emotions swelling with in her that made her want to scream, laugh and cry all at the same time.

"That reminds me," Stoick said as he reached to his belt and grabbed a scroll of parchment that had been jammed under it before handing it to Merida, "I have somethin' for ye."

"W-What is it?" Hiccup questioned as Merida quickly scanned the writing on the parchment.

"Itâ€¦it's a letter from ma father," Merida replied, looking at Hiccup with wide eyes, "Itâ€¦Itâ€¦"

"What?" Hiccup pressed.

"Ma family is comin' back tae Berk," Merida answered, her voice growing weak, "Th' lords too."

"Surprise!" Stoick shouted happily, "I sent a letter to your father as soon as I got back, after I heard how ye had all improved and invited him to come see. The weather's been mild, so there shouldn't be any fear of storms, meaning safe passage! Just think, now he and the rest of your family gets to see you help kill a dragon! It's perfect! Hel, we'll probably get this weddin' out of the way not long after!"

Stoick was so overcome that he couldn't help but reach down and pick the two of them up again, pulling them into another hug, laughing as he did.

"Just wait, girl," he continued, "Wait until your family gets to see what you've become."

Merida could only stare into Hiccup's eyes as Stoick's words echoed through her mind.

"Cannae wait," she whispered glumly, reaching out and taking Hiccup's hand, holding onto it like a life line, "Cannae wait."

A/N: So it's been awhile, hasn't it? Sorry about that guys, but this chapter turned out a little bit hard to write, to say nothing about how life decided to get in the way. Still here it is, and I hope you guys liked it! This story is about to breach seven hundred reviews and I just wanted to thank all of you again for your support! You guys are the best. As always, critiques and feedback is always welcome, so please review! Later!

27. Secrets

Chapter 27: Secrets

Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs sat in quiet misery in Toothless' cove. The only sound was the water flowing into the cove through the waterfall. Hiccup and Merida sat on a rock right by the pond, Merida resting her head on his shoulder, looking down at Dragonsbane as it sat in her lap. Fishlegs sat nearby, drawing in the dirt with a stick, his new hammer strapped to his back. Toothless wandered over to where they sat, looking at them in confusion and curiosity. Hiccup reached out and scratched the Night Fury's head, earning a happy purr in return.

"What are we going to do, guys?" Fishlegs sighed as he put the stick on the ground.

"Well, Ah'll tell ye whit we're nae gaein' tae dae," Merida said in frustration as she sat up and hopped off the rock, planting Dragonsbane into the ground, "We're nae gaein' tae mope around jist waitin' fer this all tae gae tae shite."

"But what are we going to do?" Fishlegs asked again, "How are we going to get out of having tae kill that Nightmare?"

"We leave," Hiccup spoke up, still stroking Toothless' head.

"Whit?" Merida asked in shock as she spun around to look at Hiccup.

"I think we should just leave," Hiccup repeated, turning his gaze towards Merida, a look of defeat in his eyes, "My father will never understand. Nobody in the village will. They'll see that we can't kill the Nightmare. The whole village will disown us. They'll find Toothless andâ€¦"

Hiccup trailed off, looking back to Toothless and scratching the Night Fury's head. His attention was brought back to Merida when she walked up to him and took his hand in hers. Turning back to face her, his green eyes met her icy blue ones.

"We're nae runnin' away, Hic," Merida stated, giving his hand a squeeze, "We're stronger than 'at. Ye're stronger than 'at."

"This isn't about being strong, Mer," Hiccup said with a frustrated sigh, "That won't change my dad's mind."

"Maybe nae, but there is saemethin' else we can try," Merida replied, a nervous look on her face.

"What's that?" Fishlegs questioned.

"We can break th' dragons oot," Merida stated. The boys turned and looked at her in stunned silence.

"What are you talking about, Merida?" Hiccup questioned in confusion, pulling his hand from her grasp.

"We sneak in tae th' arena an' let th' dragons oot," Merida explained, "If we dae it right nae ane wud even know we were there."

"And what would that accomplish?" Hiccup asked, growing confused and irate, "Even if we help the dragons escape, it won't change anything. The village will just capture more and we'll be right back where we started."

"But it will buy us time," Merida elaborated.

"Time for what?" Hiccup questioned.

"We might nae be able tae change yer father's mind," Merida explained, "But we can change mine's."

"What do you mean?" Fishlegs asked, a confused look on his face.

"Ah'm willin' tae admit there are a number o' similarities between Stoick an' ma father, but there's ane way 'at Ah know they're different," Merida elaborated, "Ma Da is much more reasonable than Hiccup's is."

"So, you think we should tell your dad what's going on?" Hiccup asked, looking hesitantly hopeful, "You think he will believe us?"

"Ma Da will hear us oot, all three o' us. Ma Ma too," Merida

continued, "Ah haenae always been th' best daughter but they still trust me, especially ma Da."

Merida reached out and took Hiccup's hand again, looking into his eyes.

"An' Ah feel like ma Ma trusts ye," Merida stated, smiling at Hiccup, "If we can convince her, then it doesnae even matter whit ma Da thinks."

Hiccup couldn't help but laugh at the joke, Fishlegs smiling as he saw his best friend give Merida's hand a squeeze.

"Alright," Hiccup said with a nod, "It's worth a shot. Certainly a better idea than I had."

"Wasnae a terrible idea," Merida replied with a warm smile, "Ah certainly wudnae mind runnin' away with ye."

"I'm right here you know," Fishlegs groused playful, smirking at his friends.

Hiccup and Merida chuckled, their cheeks tinted pink as they turned their attention to Fishlegs.

"Sorry about that," Hiccup apologized, "So, are you with us on this crazy idea, bud?"

"Well, I can't let you two do it by yourselves," Fishlegs replied with a smirk, "You'd probably mess it all up without me there."

"Well, thank you for that vote of confidence," Hiccup deadpanned as Merida giggled and rolled her eyes. Hiccup's attention was brought back to Toothless as he felt the Night Fury nudge him with his nose.

"What do you think, Toothless?" Hiccup asked as he reached out and scratched the Night Fury's head, earning a content purr in return.

"Ye think it's a good idea tae bring him?" Merida questioned.

"You don't get stealthier than a Night Fury," Fishlegs replied, "We're going to be dealing with a bunch of unruly, noisy dragons. What's the harm in bringing a tame, quiet one?"

"Fair enough," Merida replied with a chuckle before turning her attention back to Hiccup, "Sae, Hic, dae ye hae a plan?"

"I just might," Hiccup answered as he grabbed a stick and began drawing in the mud, "But I warn you, this one's going to be tough."

_Later, _

Night had fallen over the village, illuminated by the full moon and the torches in the village, causing dark shadows to dance across the buildings and homes. The streets were largely empty except for guards and the odd villager.

Hiccup, Merida, Fishlegs and Toothless crept through the village, keeping to the shadows on the outskirts of the village as they made their way towards the arena. Toothless slid quietly across the ground, following in the wake of the teens as they snuck from shadow to shadow.

"We're almost there," Hiccup whispered indicating to the shadow of the arena looming in the distance, "We just have to get past these last few houses."

"Isnae 'at Astrid's house?" Merida asked, nodding to one of the houses they had to pass by on their way to the arena.

"It is," Hiccup replied as they began to creep forward, "Let's hope she and her mom have turned in for the night."

As the group snuck around the house, they froze as they heard the sound of a door opening. The teens quickly pushed themselves against the side of the house as Toothless crouched down in the shadows. Peeking around the corner, Hiccup saw Astrid exit her house and walk around to the side, heading towards where a pile of chopped wood sat and began to gather some into her arms.

"Whit dae we dae?" Merida whispered anxiously.

"She's just gathering some firewood," Hiccup whispered back, "If we just wait a minute she'll head back inside."

"Hello?" Astrid suddenly spoke up, causing the three teens to freeze as their eyes went wide with fear, "Is somebody there?"

As the group held their breath, they could hear Astrid's footsteps approaching them. Thinking quickly, Hiccup spun around and began silently urging the others to go around the other corner of the house. The group quickly scrambled around the corner, disappearing just as Astrid stuck her head out from around the other corner. Quickly looking around, she raised an eyebrow in confusion when she saw that nobody was there.

"Weird," she whispered to herself, before shrugging and heading back the way she had come. Peeking around the corner, Hiccup saw her leave and signaled the others to follow him. Sneaking back around the house, the group quickly moved into the shadows and headed away from Astrid's home as she moved to reenter it with an armful of firewood. Just as the group was about to slip away, Fishlegs' foot caught on a rock, sending him sprawling across the ground with a thud.

"Who's there!?" Astrid demanded, placing the wood down as Fishlegs scrambled to his feet and rushed over to the others who disappeared around a corner just as Astrid walked over, peering into the darkness that the others had disappeared into.

"That was way to close," Hiccup whispered as the group slowed down as they approached the arena.

"Ye're tellin' me," Merida agreed as they approached the entrance into the arena, "Let's get this done afore someane else wanders along."

Grabbing the portcullis, Fishlegs lifted it up, allowing the others to pass before he quickly slid under and pushed it hard upward, causing the portcullis to lock into place.

"Sae, how are we gaein' tae dae this?" Merida asked as they approached the dragon pens, Toothless sniffing around the arena floor as they talked.

"We should probably let out Boudica and Meatlug first," Hiccup suggested, "They'll at least be glad to see us."

"Sounds like a plan," Fishlegs agreed as he wandered over to the lever he had seen Gobber use earlier that morning and gave it a pull, causing the bolts holding the two pens close to release. After a few moments, the two dragons nudged the doors open and exited their pens. Meatlug barked excitedly as he saw Fishlegs, running over to the young man and giving him a big lick.

"Hey, hey, easy!" Fishlegs said with a laugh, patting Meatlug on the head, "I'm happy to see you too."

Merida laughed as she reached up and pat Boudica on her snout as the dragon nudged her and purred. As she enjoyed being pet by Merida, Boudica looked over and locked eyes with Meatlug before letting out a growl which the Gronckle quickly returned.

"Hey now, none o' 'at," Merida scolded, grabbing Boudica's snout and pointing her finger at the Nadder, "We're all friends here."

Boudica seemed to grumble at that but calmed at that, as did Meatlug after a few calming words from Fishlegs.

"Okay guys," Hiccup spoke up as Toothless settled next to him, allowing Hiccup to scratch the top of his head, "Now we need to work on getting them out of here."

"What the Hel is going on here!?" a new voice shouted, causing all three of the teens eyes go wide as they spun around, finding Astrid standing not far from the entrance to the arena, her battleaxe in hand and a shocked look on her face.

"Astrid!" Fishlegs gasped in surprise as the three dragons looked at the other girl in confusion, "W-What are you doing here!?"

"What am I doing here!?" Astrid cried, "What are youâ€¦!"

Astrid froze mid-sentence, her eyes going wide with fright as they fell on Toothless. The Night Fury snarled angrily as it narrowed his eyes at Astrid, baring his pointed teeth.

"Look out!" Astrid shouted as she rushed forward, shoving Hiccup to the side as she faced Toothless with her axe at the ready. Before either one of them could attack the other, Merida jumped forward and grabbed Astrid by her arms, twisting the blonde around and tossing her to the ground while pulling her axe from her hands. As Astrid pushed herself up to a sitting position, Hiccup stepped between her and Toothless, holding his hands up towards the snarling dragon.

Scrambling away, Astrid found herself moving toward Boudica who

growled angrily at her. Yelping in surprise, Astrid scrambled to her feet as Merida stepped in front of Boudica to calm the Nadder down, only for the blonde to stumble into Meatlug, the dragon snorting irately at her as she did. Astrid spun towards Meatlug and began to back away as Fishlegs stepped between them.

"It's okay!" Fishlegs exclaimed as he and the others calmed the dragons down as Astrid moved away, "It's okay. She's a friend."

Turning to look at Astrid, the three teens saw her staring at them and the dragons with wide, frightened eyes.

"It's alright, Astrid," Fishlegs said soothingly, holding his hand out towards her, "Youâ€|you just scared them is all."

"I scared them?" Astrid asked incredulously, "Who are 'them'?"

"Astrid," Hiccup spoke up, turning and motioning to each of the dragons in turn, "Meet Toothless, Boudica and Meatlug."

Each of the dragons snarled dangerously at Astrid, causing her to inch away.

"Iâ€|I can't believeâ€|are you seriouslyâ€|what are you doing with these dragons!?" Astrid questioned hysterically, having trouble putting her thoughts into words, "Why are they out of their pens!? Why are youâ€|naming them?"

"Listen, Astrid," Fishlegs spoke up, bringing Astrid's attention back to him, "What we know about dragonsâ€|it's all wrong. They're not monsters. They have feelings and quirks and all these things that we never knew about."

Reaching out, Fishlegs moved to take Astrid's hand.

"Come on, I'll show you," he began to say with a smile, but it ended with a yelp of pain as Astrid slapped his hand away.

"Don't touch me!" Astrid shouted, shoving Fishlegs' in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Meatlug snarled dangerously, forcing Merida to step in front of the Gronckle as she and the boys looked at Astrid in surprise.

"This is insane!" Astrid shouted as she backed further from the others, inching towards the arena's exit, "You're all insane!"

With that, she turned and began to run towards the exit.

"Da da da! We're dead," Hiccup said sarcastically as they watched Astrid leave.

Watching Astrid leave, Meatlug suddenly snorted and began to rush after her, brushing past Fishlegs as the young man picked himself up.

"Hey!" Fishlegs called as he began to run after Meatlug, "Where do you think you're going!?"

Meatlug paid no heed to Fishlegs as he continued after Astrid. Leaping forward, Fishlegs managed to grab onto Meatlug's back just as the Gronckle leapt into the air and began buzzing after Astrid. Fishlegs gripped Meatlug's back with all his might as the Gronckle shot through the entrance, reaching out and plucking Astrid off the ground before she had a chance to get more than a few yards from the arena, her screams echoing through the night as the three went flying into the star filled sky. There was a quiet moment as Hiccup, Merida and their dragons stared in the direction the three had gone, trying to process what had just occurred.

"Well," Hiccup muttered blankly, "That just happened."

"Come on!" Merida shouted as she turned to Boudica and tried to pull herself up onto the Nadder's back, the dragon proving decidedly unhelpful in the task, "We hae to gae after them!"

"You think she's going to let you ride her?" Hiccup asked as he hopped onto Toothless' back and watched Merida struggle to do the same with Boudica.

"Ah'll be fine, jist gae!" Merida barked, to which Hiccup nodded his head and urged Toothless out of the arena and into the sky in the direction Meatlug had gone in. Turning her attention back to Boudica, she narrowed her eyes in determination and tried to crawl up onto the Nadder's back, but the dragon quickly shook her off, snorting in annoyance.

Growling in frustration, Merida pushed herself to her feet and stomped over to Boudica, grabbing the Nadder's jaw and forcing it to look her in the eye, causing the dragon to squeal in surprise.

"Listen, Boudica, Ah know ye an' Ah haenae gotten tae bond as much as Ah wud hae liked," Merida said calmly but firmly, looking straight into the Nadder's eyes, "But Ah need ye tae trust me with this. Ah'm gaein' tae get ye oot, but Ah cannae dae 'at if ye daenae let me on yer back."

There was a quiet moment as Merida and Boudica stared into each other's eyes, a feeling welling up in the girl's chest that she couldn't quite identify. Suddenly, Boudica snorted before leaning down, looking at Merida expectantly. Smiling, Merida quickly sat on Boudica's shoulders, slinging her legs around the base of the Nadder's neck. Merida grabbed one of Boudica's spines to keep herself balanced as the Nadder stood back up.

"Alright," she muttered to herself, "This will be nae problem. Jist like ridin' a horse. A flyin', fire-breathin' horse."

A nervous look passed over Merida's features as Boudica shifted under her. Taking a deep breath, Merida calmed her nerves, a look of determination in her eyes.

"Nae problem," she stated, before clicking her heels into Boudica's sides. The Nadder let out a squeak of surprise and took off running out of the arena before quickly leaping into the air and soaring into the night sky.

"Oh gods!" Astrid screamed in panic as the ground sped past below her

in a blur of motion, "Oh gods, this is it!"

Whizzing out over the forest, Meatlug made a beeline for a nearby pine tree before unceremoniously dropping Astrid onto it. Astrid held onto one of the branches for dear life, dangling a dizzying height off the ground.

"Fishlegs!" Astrid screamed as Meatlug sat down on the tree, the top bending under the dragon's weight as Fishlegs managed to pull himself up into a sitting position, "Get me down from here!"

"I'm so sorry, Astrid!" Fishlegs apologized as he struggled to stay on Meatlug's back, "I don't know why he did that!"

As Fishlegs and Astrid shouted at each other, Hiccup flew up on Toothless, who perched on a nearby tree.

"Hiccup!" Astrid screamed, turning her ire towards the other boy, "You better get me down, right now!"

"You have to give us a chance to explain!" Hiccup pleaded.

"I don't have to do crap!" Astrid shouted back as she began shimmying down the branch, trying to find a way to climb down the tree, "I'm not listening to anything either of you have to say!"

"Then we won't speak," Merida spoke up as Boudica landed on another tree, "Just let us show ye."

Astrid said nothing, hanging from the tree and purposefully not looking at any of the teens, glaring at nothing and everything.

"Astrid," Fishlegs pleaded, holding his hand out to her, "Please."

Astrid looked up at Fishlegs and held his gaze for a few moments before sighing and pulling herself up onto the branch. Fishlegs offered to help her onto Meatlug's back, despite the Gronckle's growls of protests but Astrid slapped his hand away. Grabbing hold of the spines on Meatlug's back, Astrid pulled herself onto the Gronckle and awkwardly settled in.

"Okay," Astrid said uncomfortably, "Now get me down."

"Alright," Fishlegs said with a nod before turning his attention to Meatlug, "Okay, Meatlug. Down. Gently. Please."

Meatlug snorted and turned his attention towards where Toothless and Boudica were sitting. The dragons looked at each other for a few moments before Hiccup noticed that Meatlug's lips were twitching oddly. As he continued to watch the Gronckle as Fishlegs tried to urge Meatlug down, Hiccup felt a sense of familiarity pass over him. Looking down, Hiccup saw that Toothless' mouth was also twitching and then it hit him. Toothless and Meatlug were smiling at each other.

"Oh boy," Hiccup squeaked before Meatlug shot into the air, Astrid and Fishlegs screaming as they flew into the night sky.

"Of course," Hiccup sighed as he, Merida and their dragons took a moment to watch Meatlug fly away before the young man and woman urged the dragons after their friends.

"Meatlug!" Fishlegs shouted as Astrid screamed behind him, both of the grabbing anything and everything they could in an attempt to stay on the Gronckle's back, "What are you doing!? Stop! Bad dragon!"

Meatlug paid no heed to what Fishlegs was saying as he buzzed past the cloud line, a sea of clouds floating below them while the moon and stars hung in the dark sky above. A few seconds later, Toothless and Boudica shot out from under the clouds to join them.

"Sorry!" Hiccup called as Meatlug began to slow down, "They're not usually like this!"

As Hiccup spoke, Meatlug began to shift direction so that he could dive back down towards the ground, causing Astrid to latch onto Fishlegs, wrapping her legs and arms around him as they both screamed.

"This is gettin' ridiculous," Merida muttered as she and Hiccup directed Toothless and Boudica after the Gronckle.

Fishlegs and Astrid screamed as Meatlug went buzzing across the water, slamming through a cresting wave and drenching them both.

"Meatlug!" Fishlegs shouted as the Gronckle splashed him and Astrid again, "What are you doing!? We need her to like us!"

Turning back towards the sky, Meatlug began spinning rapidly as Toothless and Boudica chased after.

"And now the spinning!" Hiccup called out towards Meatlug as he and Merida flew alongside the Gronckle and its passengers, "Thank you for nothing, you useless reptile!"

"Okay! I'm sorry!" Astrid shouted as she hugged Fishlegs closer, burying her face in his back, "I'm sorry!"

As she said this, Meatlug stopped spinning and the three dragons quickly shared a look. Grunting, Meatlug leveled off and began to buzz lightly through the air, Toothless and Boudica gliding along next to him.

As the pace slowed, Astrid slowly opened her eyes and pulled away from Fishlegs, looking around at the night sky that surrounded them. Towering clouds cast in shadow formed every conceivable shape. The stars twinkled in the sky as the fires illuminating the village of Berk seemed to mirror them back. All the while, the moon hung above it all, casting its pale radiance on everyone and everything.

Carefully, Astrid reached, running her hand through a passing cloud with a look of wonder on her face. Chuckling to herself, she turned back to Fishlegs and gently wrapped her arms around Fishlegs as she laid her head on his back, causing the young man to blush as his eyes widened in surprise. He glanced at Hiccup and Merida, who shared a

look before smiling at him.

"I never thought something could be so beautiful," Astrid said in awe as she looked around some more, "Thisâ€|this is amazing."

Astrid sighed as she pushed herself away from Fishlegs again.

"Why did you keep all this from me?" Astrid questioned.

"Isn't it obvious?" Hiccup asked, raising an eyebrow at Astrid, "You didn't exactly have the best reaction just now."

"We weren't whit ye cud call friends when this all started either," Merida added.

"Fine, I guess you make a good point," Astrid relented, "Still, this is all so amazing, I never thought anything like this wasâ€|"

Astrid paused, a look of horror crossing her face as she came to a realization.

"Guys," she said wearily, "What are we going to do about the final test?"

The others remained silent, downcast looks crossing their faces.

"You know we're going to have to kill a dragon, right?" Astrid pushed.

"Don't remind us," Hiccup grumbled.

"Is that why you guys were in the arena?" Astrid questioned, "Were you trying to release all the dragons?"

"Yeah, our plan was-" Merida began before dissolving into a scream of surprise as Boudica suddenly dove downward through sky. Before anyone could react, Toothless did the same thing, dragging a surprised Hiccup with him.

"Oh boy," Fishlegs muttered as Astrid tightened her grip on him before Meatlug went diving after the other two dragons.

"Toothless, what's happening?" Hiccup asked nervously as the three dragons went shooting into a fog bank, "What is it?"

As if to answer him, a Monstrous Nightmare suddenly came into view ahead of them, carrying a cow in claws.

"Get doon," Merida whispered as she pushed herself against Boudica's back, the others following suite on their own dragons. As they watched, more and more dragons appeared through the fog, each carrying livestock or something plucked from the sea. Before any of the teens knew it, they found themselves in the middle of an entire flock of dragons, the night air filled with their roars and grunts.

"What's going on?" Astrid whispered in fear.

"I don't know," Fishlegs whispered back before turning his attention

to Meatlug, "Meatlug, you have to get us out of here!"

Meatlug grunted and shook his head, ignoring Fishlegs.

"Something's wrong," Hiccup said as he patted Toothless' side but got no response.

"It's like they're in saeme kind o' trance," Merida stated, getting a similar lack of reaction from Boudica.

"What are they doing?" Astrid wondered, watching the other dragons that surrounded them.

"It looks like they're bringing in their kills," Fishlegs stated.

"Bringing them where?" Hiccup questioned.

"There!" Merida said, pointing forward at something emerging through the fog.

As they watched, a massive collection of rocks and crags came into view, shooting out of the churning water, surrounded by a thin stretch of rocky beach. The island was covered in cracks and caves that the teens could see dragons flying in and out of. The most noticeable feature of the island though was the large opening at its top which glowed red and belched smoke.

"Is that what I think it is?" Astrid questioned.

"The Nest," Fishlegs whispered in awe.

"Guys, I think we're in trouble," Hiccup moaned as he watched the approaching island.

"More than ye know," Merida stated as she pointed towards the ground. Looking down, the teens saw that on the beaches were a number of longships as well as a few people moving around them. People wearing bear pelts.

"Gods, are thoseâ€¦!" Astrid trailed off as her face paled.

"Vendal," Merida finished, her eyes narrowing.

"What are they doing here!?" Fishlegs questioned.

"I don't know," Hiccup stated with a nervous gulp as the teens and the dragons continued to approach the island, "But I know one thing for certain now. We are definitely in trouble."

A/N: Hey guys, so things are picking up now! Hope you guys liked this one, this was a pretty pivitol scene in the movie so I'm curious to see what you guys thought of my version of it. As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

28. Dragon's Den

****Chapter 28: Dragon's Den****

The smell of sulfur mixed with the scent of the sea as the dragons rapidly approached the Nest, the island almost glowing from the molten rock leaking out of it at various points. Darting into one of the larger caves along with the rest of the flock, the dragons shot through the caverns, dodging around stalactites and stalagmites as they went. Glancing down, the teens could see Vandal moving through the caverns as well.

"What are they doing here?" Astrid whispered.

"Gods only know," Fishlegs replied as they whipped through cavern.

After a few moments, the dragons came shooting out of the tunnel into a wide, open cavern that seemed to delve into the very roots of the island. Smoke billowed up from below them, obscuring everything except an ominous red glow that illuminated the cavern. As the teens watched, the dragons began dropping their catches into the pit, the smoke quickly swallowing the food.

"What my dad wouldn't give to see this," Hiccup muttered to himself as he looked around in amazement.

"Mine too," Merida agreed as she looked down at the pit and noticed Vandal gathered around the edges.

Flying upwards, Toothless, Boudica and Meatlug landed on a ledge near the top of the cavern that was hidden in shadow. Quietly, the dragons and teens gathered on the edge, looking down as more dragons streamed into the cavern.

"Well, it's satisfying to know all our food has been dumped down a giant hole," Hiccup grumbled as he watched the dragons drop their catches into the pit.

"They aren't eatin' any o' it," Merida stated, her eyes narrowing in confusion, "Why?"

As they watched, they saw a Gronckle buzz in, looking exhausted. With a grunt, the Gronckle landed on a ledge before leaning over the edge and spitting out a single fish into the pit. As the fish fell into the pit, the cavern went quiet, the dragons grumbling as the Vandal whispered amongst themselves.

As the teens watched, they saw someone emerge from one of the tunnels leading into the cavern. Someone big.

"Godsâ€¦is thatâ€¦" Astrid whispered, her face going white from fear.

"Mor'du," Merida finished, her voice quavering.

As the teens watched, the giant form of Mor'du moved towards the Gronckle, which sat on the ledge panting from exhaustion. Kneeling down, Mor'du put his large hand on top of the Gronckle's head, causing the dragon to freeze up with fear.

"That's all you could get, huh?" Mor'du asked the Gronckle, his voice laced with false sweetness as his hand slipped down the dragon's neck, "Not a very big fish. In factâ€¦"

Mor'du gripped the Gronckle's neck tightly and jerked it, snapping the dragon's spine. The teens gasped in quietly in shock as Meatlug whimpered sadly, prompting Fishleg to reach up and rub the Gronckle's head comfortingly.

"You're much bigger," Mor'du finished as he stood up, holding the now dead dragon in his hand before tossing it into the pit. Turning, he looked around at the cavern at all the dragons looking down at him.

"I trust this will be a reminder of the sort of quota we expect?" Mor'du questioned, acting like he was speaking to a group of children, "Yes? Good."

With that, Mor'du went back the way he had come, disappearing into the tunnels with a number of Vendals.

"What do we do?" Fishlegs asked, looking over at Hiccup, who had a thoughtful look on his face.

"There are too many questions here," Hiccup said solemnly, "What are the Vandal doing here? Why are the dragons throwing their food into that pit and why do the Vandal want them to keep doing it?"

"Sae whit dae ye want tae dae?" Merida questioned.

"We figure out what's in that hole," Hiccup stated simply, a look of determination on his face.

"You sure that's a good idea?" Fishlegs asked nervously.

"Fishlegs, something is going on here," Hiccup explained, looking his friend dead in the eye as he did, "Something that is affecting the village. It's our duty to find out what. For the good of our people."

Fishlegs nodded quietly while Astrid raised an eyebrow at Hiccup.

"When did you become your father's son?" she asked with a smirk, prompting Merida to shoot a glare her way.

"Are ye with us or nae?" Merida asked Astrid pointedly.

"Yeah, I'm with you," Astrid replied, shooting Merida a look of her own, "No need to get snippy, Princess."

"I thought we were past all this," Fishlegs muttered with a sigh.

"We are," Astrid replied plainly before turning her attention back towards Hiccup, "What's our first move?"

"We have to find a way down into that hole without being seen," Hiccup stated.

"Well, we're nae gaein' tae dae it here," Merida stated as she looked over the ledge into the cavernous pit below, "This place is swarmin' with dragons an' Vandal."

"We'll have to use the side passages we saw the Vandal using," Hiccup surmised, "There has to be a way down there."

"What if we run into any Vandal in the tunnels?" Fishlegs questioned.

"Then we do what any other Viking would do," Astrid answered, placing a hand on Fishlegs' shoulder while drawing her waraxe with the other, "We fight."

"Simple enough," Merida stated with a shrug.

"Alright, let's go," Hiccup said as he stood up, prompting the others to as well. Glancing around, they spotted a tunnel just off the ledge. As they made their way to it, they paused when they noticed the three dragons were following them.

"Ah daenae think we're gaein' tae get very far with these three followin' us," Merida whispered, to which Hiccup nodded in agreement.

"Hold on guys," Hiccup said, stepping forward and holding his hands up, causing the dragons to stop in their tracks, "We need you all to stay here."

Toothless grumbled discontently, Boudica and Meatlug echoing his feelings.

"I know, I know," Hiccup replied in a calming tone, "But it's going to be dangerous in there. We need to be quiet and out of sight. You guys are just too big."

Toothless whined, stepping forward and nudging Hiccup with his nose.

"I know pal," Hiccup replied with a small smile, patting Toothless on his head, "I'll be back soon. Stay safe."

Merida stepped forwards and rubbed her hand on Boudica's nose, before placing her head against the dragon's scales. Meanwhile, Fishlegs reached out and scratched Meatlugs' head, earning a purr from the Gronckle.

"You know, an hour ago, I thought you all were crazy," Astrid said with a bemused smile on her face, "Now, I'm just jealous."

"Don't worry Astrid," Fishlegs said as he and the others turned away from their dragons and began to make their way into the tunnel, "If we survive this, I'm sure we can find you a dragon."

Entering the tunnel, the teens found it dark and cramped, having to duck their heads to move through it.

"Ah'm guessin' Mor'du daesnae come up here often," Merida commented as the teens began making their way down the cramped tunnel. As they did, Astrid took a curious sniff of the air before making a disgusted sound.

"It stinks in here," Astrid said with a groan, "What is

that?"

"Brimstone," Hiccup replied after a cursory sniff, "Probably some black rock too. Hel, with all the dragons here, I wouldn't be surprised if this place was covered in black rock."

"What to dragons have to do with this black rock stuff?" Astrid asked, confused. The teens paused and Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs shared an awkward look amongst themselves.

"It's probably better if you didn't know," Fishlegs simply before he and the others turned away and began walking down the tunnel again, leaving a bewildered Astrid behind them. Astrid watched them walk away with a confused look on her face before she sighed and began to follow them.

Slowly, the group made their way through the tunnel, which began to grow larger as they went. Soon, they found other tunnels that branched off of the one they were in. The sounds of dragons snarling and roaring echoed down the tunnels as well as conversations being carried on in a language none of them understood.

Coming to an area where the tunnel crossed with another one, Hiccup signaled for them to stop and push up against the tunnel wall. A few seconds later, a pair of Vandal came walking by grunting to each other. As they reached the crossroads, one of the Vandal paused and began to sniff the air. The teens held their breath, doing their best to blend into the shadows as they kept tight grips on their weapons. After a few agonizing seconds and a grunt from the other Vandal, the first paused, before sneezing loudly. Taking a few more sniffs to clear its nose, the Vandal grunted to his comrade and the two continued on their way. As the Vandal turned around the corner, the teens let out sighs of relief.

"Come on," Hiccup said, motioning for the others to follow him, "Let's keep moving. Next time we won't be so lucky."

Quietly creeping down the tunnel, the teens slowly made their way deeper and deeper into the mountain. Here and there they spotted more Vandal, usually in chambers off to the side of the tunnels. At one point, they crossed a narrow bridge that spanned a large chamber where they saw dozens of Vandal interacting with one another. At another, they caught sight of what could only be a butcher shop, filled with meat possessing all too familiar anatomy.

After what seemed like an eternity of walking, Fishlegs paused as he noticed something on the wall of the tunnel.

"Hey guys," Fishlegs whispered, catching the others' attentions, "Come check this out."

Turning towards Fishlegs, the others moved to his side to see what he was looking at.

"What are they?" Astrid questioned, squinting her eyes to get a better look in the dim lighting.

"They look like runes," Hiccup replied as he reached up and ran his fingers along the strange carvings in the stone.

"They're everywhere" Merida stated, looking around and seeing the rock walls were covered in runes, "Whit dae they say?"

"I can't really make out the whole thing," Fishlegs said, squinting to get a better look at the runes, "But the words dragon and ward get mentioned a lot. So does the word red."

"What's going on here?" Astrid muttered looking around in confusion.

"Funny," a deep, rumbling voice asked from behind them, causing the teens to freeze up as their eyes went wide with fear, "I was about to ask the same question."

Slowly, the teenagers turned around, only to find Mor'du towering over them, his mouth fixed in a grin that showed off his yellowed, pointed teeth.

"Hello," he greeted with a chuckle, a sinister look in his eyes, "Not often I get visitors. What brings you all into my humble abode?"

The teens backed away from Mor'du down the tunnel, their faces paling as they inched away from the Demon Bear.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Mor'du questioned as he took a step towards them, turning his attention towards Merida, "I didn't expect to find you here, cub. Does your father know you're running around strange caves with Viking brats?"

Taking a quick sniff of the air, Mor'du's grin grew wider as he turned his eyes towards Hiccup.

"I recognize that smell," Mor'du stated as he leaned down, his face inches away from Hiccup's, the foul stench of his breathe washing over the Viking teen, "You're a Haddock. Stoick's boy, right, little fish?"

Hiccup said nothing, his breathe catching in his throat as it closed up in terror.

"My, none of you are very talkative, are you?" Mor'du said with a chuckle, "But come now, I really must know. How did you get here?"

The teens said nothing, staring open mouthed at Mor'du as they continued to carefully inch away from the Demon Bear.

"ANSWER ME!" Mor'du bellowed, his face changing to a hideous snarl as his voice seemed to shake the very stone around them. The sudden change caused all four of them to scream, their legs rooting them where they stood. A deadly silence fell over the tunnel, broken only the sound of Mor'du's heavy breathing and the echo of approaching footsteps.

"Still not willing to talk, huh?" Mor'du said, his grin returning, "That's okay."

Before any of them could react, Mor'du reached out and wrapped one of his giant hands around Merida, causing her to scream in fear as the monstrous man began lifting her up.

"Merida!" Hiccup shouted, lashing out with his sword almost instinctively. As the blade connected with one of Mor'du's fingers, the giant man let out a startled yelp, his hand opening back up and dropping Merida back to the ground. Merida quickly scrambled to her feet and rushed over to her friends' sides as Mor'du lifted his finger up to inspect it. A small cut had formed on his index finger, a single drop of blood slowly oozing out of it.

"It's been awhile since someone made me bleed," Mor'du said before sticking out his long, off-color tongue and lapping up the drop of blood as he turned his eyes towards Hiccup, "It's been even longer since I last saw that blade."

Hiccup quickly glanced down at his sword, a few drops of Mor'du's blood collected on its tip.

"That's right, little fish, I know that sword," Mor'du said, turning to face Hiccup fully, "More importantly, I know the witch who gave it to you."

A collective gasp escaped from Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs' mouths while Astrid shot them a confused look.

"What's he talking about?" Astrid asked, doing her best to keep one eye on Mor'du as he loomed over them.

"Hilde," Merida whispered in fear.

"Who's Hilde?" Astrid questioned, growing more confused before a chuckle from Mor'du brought her attention back to him.

"She's a mutual friend of ours, let's say," Mor'du explained cryptically as he took another step towards the teens, who continued to move away from him, "Which brings up an even more pressing question."

Suddenly, Mor'du had leaned down again, his face inches from the teens, his foul stench washing over them as he glared at them with his one red eye.

"WHERE IS SHE!?" Mor'du demanded, spittle flying from his mouth as he bellowed at the teens, who screamed in fear, "I know she's on that miserable little island of yours! Tell me where she is!"

Snarling, Mor'du reached out for one of the teens again, causing them all to scrambled away as his massive fist closed around air.

"Run!" Hiccup shouted, urging the others further down the tunnel as Mor'du roared and began to lumber after them, "Go! Run! Go!"

The teens raced down the tunnel, Mor'du literally breathing down their necks as they ran past the rune covered stone. Glancing over his shoulder, Hiccup had a split second to duck as Mor'du swung at him, the air whooshing in the limbs wake nearly knocking the young Viking to his knees. As Hiccup stumbled, he glanced over his shoulder again at the snarling visage barreling after him and his friends and for a split second, he noticed something else. Something about the runes covering the tunnel walls. Then it hit him.

The runes were glowing. Glowing red.

"Hiccup!" Merida's voice shot through his brain and brought his attention back to what was happening in front of him. The tunnel was quickly coming to an end, opening up into a large cavern that glowed the same eerie red they had seen when they first came into the Nest.

"Jump!" Merida screamed as she and the others raced into the cavern, "Jump, Hiccup! Jump!"

Running on instinct, Hiccup took a leap forward just as Mor'du made another grab for him. Mor'du managed to just graze Hiccup's leg with one of his fingers, the force sending the young man spinning through the air before he landed hard on the stone ground and rolled for a few feet.

"Hiccup!" Merida shouted as she rushed to his side and helped him to his feet, "Are ye alright!?"

"Yeah!" Hiccup replied as he scrambled to his feet, almost falling over again as he tried to get his feet under him, "Come on! We have to run!"

"Hiccup wait," Astrid said, causing Hiccup to pause as he turned to look at her, seeing the blonde point in the direction they had come from, "Look."

Turning around, Hiccup saw Mor'du looming in the tunnel they had just exited from, snarling and glaring at the teens but making no other attempt to follow them. The runes that covered the stone around Mor'du were glowing brightly, casting the Demon Bear in a red light that only accentuated his awful features.

"What's he doing?" Fishlegs asked nervously, his eyes flickering between his friends and Mor'du.

"Why are those runes glowin'?" Merida questioned, squinting her eyes and taking a tentative step forward.

"Iâ€¦I don't know," Hiccup stated, answering both questions at once, "But I don't like it. Somethingâ€¦Something's wrong."

"You're right on that account, little fish," Mor'du grumbled as he slowly began to back away down the tunnel, flashing a smile as he went, "As they say, out of the frying pan and into the fire."

Mor'du chuckled as he disappeared, taking the red glow with him. Slowly, the teens turned and looked uneasily at one another.

"What's he talking about?" Astrid asked nervously.

"Nothing good," Hiccup replied as he began looking around at his surroundings. The chamber was filled with the same smoke they had seen when they had come in, with the same strange red glow illuminating it. The sound of dragons squawking and roaring at each other came from above them, and they could hear the muffled sound of Vandal shouting to one another. Taking a step back, Hiccup's foot hit something hard and he almost trip. Letting out a startled yelp, Hiccup briefly fought to maintain his balance before spinning around

to see what he had nearly trip over. His breath caught in his throat when he found himself looking at the remains of a Gronckle laying in a pool of drying blood.

"Gods," Fishlegs whispered in shock, his face paling as he looked at the body, "Is thatâ€|?"

"Aye," Merida replied, indicating to the Gronckle's broken neck, "It's th' same ane."

"Which means we're at the bottom," Hiccup stated, looking around and seeing the carcasses of other animals through the smoke.

"Soâ€|what else is down here?" Astrid questioned, turning to look at Hiccup. As she did, a loud bark caught their attention, bringing it back to above them. Through the fog, dozens of feet above them, the teens could make out the shapes of Toothless, Boudica and Meatlug perched on an outcropping looking down at them.

"Whit are they daein'!?" Merida asked fearfully, "Whit if someane sees them!?"

"I don't think they're worried about that," Astrid stated uneasily.

"Why don't they come down to us?" Fishlegs asked, noticing how agitated the three dragons appeared.

"I don't think they can," Hiccup said, pointing up with his sword, indicating towards another series of runes engraved just below the outcropping the dragons sat on, glowing bright red through the smoke.

"What's with those runes?" Astrid questioned, tightening her grip on her waraxe.

"I don't know," Hiccup said, becoming more wary by the second, "But I know something is very wrong here."

"It's like these runes are designed to keep certain things out," Fishlegs mused in confusion, "But why?"

"That's the thing, Fishlegs," Hiccup spoke up, his eyes darting in every direction, gripping his sword so tight his knuckles turned white, "I don't think those runes are keeping anything out."

"Then whit are they daein'?" Merida questioned, nocking an arrow in her bow and pulling the string tight.

"I think they're keeping something in," Hiccup replied, turning and looking Merida dead in eye as he said it. A second after he did, there was a deep, thunderous rumbling which caused the very stone beneath their feet to shake. At first, Hiccup thought it was an earthquake, before a rhythm developed to it. To Hiccup it sounded like something, the thought of which caused a cold chill run down his spine.

It sounded like laughter.

"**Clever, aren't we?**" a deep booming voice questioned from within

the fog before the ground shook under their feet again, almost knocking the four teens to the ground.

"W-Who's there!?" Hiccup called, trying his best to keep his voice even as he and his friends looked around wildly.

"**I could ask you the same question,**" the voice replied as Hiccup caught sight of some giant shadow moving across the smoke, "**But in truth, we both already know one another.**"

"Weâ€|do?" Hiccup questioned wearily.

"**Oh yes,**" the voice hissed with pleasure, "**We have quite the history, you and I, Siegfriedson.**"

"What did you call me?" Hiccup questioned as a knot formed in his stomach.

"**Not used to that title, are we?**" the voice questioned with a deep chuckle that shook the ground, "**It is true, none the less. You are a son of Siegfried.**"

"How do you know that?" Hiccup asked, his eyes scanning the smoke as shadows continued to move just out of sight.

"**There's far more ways to view the world than you know, Siegfriedson,**" the voice taunted, "**I can hear it in your voice, and smell it in your blood. You can't hide anything from me.**"

"Well, you have me at a disadvantage then," Hiccup replied, gulping nervously between words, "I-I still don't know who you are."

"**And here I thought you were so clever,**" the voice answered with another earth shaking laugh, "**Here, let me give you a few hints.**"

The earth seemed to heave beneath the teens feet as the shadows began to move closer through the smoke.

"**My teeth are daggers,**" the voice growled as the sound of something sharp grinding against stone assaulted their ears while sparks shot up through the smoke, briefly illuminating a massive shape, "**My claws are swords.**"

"**My scales are iron,**" the voice continued as the massive shape began to circle the teens, who looked on fearfully, "**My bones are granite.**"

"**My steps are an earthquake!**" the voice announced before the ground began to crack and buckle around the teens, knocking them all to the ground.

"**My wings are a hurricane!**" the voice went on, before a powerful gust of wind kicked up, forcing the teens to hunker down as debris and smoke swirled around them, flecks of stone cutting their skin.

"**My breath is FIRE!**" the voice roared before the whole cavern was illuminated by a gigantic fireball, the heat so intense that Hiccup

was worried his skin was about to melt off. Then, just as quickly, the fire subsided and the air cooled. Cautiously, Hiccup lifted his head to look around the cavern again. The smoke had vanished, blown and burnt away. The rock surrounding them had been seared by the flame while here and there pockets of flame still burnt, casting dancing shadows around the young Viking.

It was then, after taking in his surroundings, that Hiccup felt a presence looming over him. Slowly turning around, Hiccup found a colossal dragon standing only a few yards away from him, looking down as it towered over the young Viking. It was a lumbering beast, longer than ten longboats with a torso larger than any building on Berk and legs thicker than the mightiest tree. Its massive head was square shaped compared to any other dragon Hiccup had seen and a fin-like ridge grew around the base of its skull. Its tail ended in a giant club from which numerous spikes protruded and a forest of spines ran down its back. Its wingspan was as large as the dragon was long, with holes poking through the membrane here and there. Its scales were a dark reddish color, making it look like the dragon was covered in rust. Its nose was short and blunted, with two massive nostrils sitting above its mouth. The dragon had an astounding three sets of eyes, each color a deep red and each staring down at the teens. The dragon's mouth was locked in a demonic grin, showing off pointed teeth longer than Hiccup was tall.

"**I AM DEATH!**" the dragon bellowed, its breath laced with the smell of brimstone and burnt flesh, its mouth illuminated by auburn colored flames.

The teens stood frozen in horror, their brains rushing to process the terror their eyes beheld.

"**Do you know me now, Siegfriedson?**" the dragon questioned, leaning closer to look at Hiccup with three of its eyes, each one larger than the young man.

"Y-Yes!" Hiccup replied, on the verge of hyperventilating, "You're the!"

"**Come now, boy, out with it!**" the dragon demanded impatiently.

"The Red Death," Hiccup said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"**See,**" the Red Death stated with another rumbling chuckle, "**I told you we knew one another.**"

The cavern quieted as the teens stared at the Red Death in awe struck terror.

"**You look surprised,**" the Red Death stated as he began to circle around Hiccup and his friends.

"I-I j-just never expected to find you here-or ever," Hiccup muttered as sweat began to form on his brow, "A-And I certainly didn't expect to talk to you. I didn't even know dragons could talk."

"**There is much you do not know about dragons, Siegfriedson,**" the Red

Death said, his tail gouging up large chunks of rock as it dragged behind the dragon, ****"But let it be known I am no ordinary dragon."****

Hiccup could say nothing in return, his voice having left him. Chuckling again, the Red Death lay down on its belly, resting its chin on the stone floor as it observed the teens lazily.

****"I see you've brought guests with you**,"** the Red Death commented conversationally, taking a deep sniff of the air as his eyes roamed over the teens.

****"I don't recognize your smell,**"** the Red Death stated as it looked at Fishlegs, who began to shake uncontrollably, ****"I must not have met any of your brood before. I'll make a point to fix that in the future.**"**

Fishlegs could only whimper in reply.

****"You must be a daughter of that old Gaul,**"** the Red Death said as he turned its gaze towards Astrid, ****"Tell me, did his strength carry on through his bloodline?*"****

Astrid said nothing in return, merely tightening her grasp on her waraxe, a sight that made the Red Death chuckle again.

****"And a daughter of Boudica, my, this is a rare treat,**"** the Red Death continued as his eyes turned towards Merida, ****"I wonder what brings you here, so far away from home.**"**

Merida could say nothing as she took a step back while the Red Death pushed himself back to his feet.

****"In fact, that's a question I have for all of you,**"** the Red Death pondered, ****"How did you all come to be here?*"****

Taking another sniff of the air, the Red Death's eyes widened in realization.

****"Ah, I see it now,**"** the Red Death said as he turned his attention back to Hiccup, ****"I can smell him on you.**"**

"Smellâ€|Smell who?" Hiccup questioned hesitantly.

****"Your little friend,**"** the Red Death replied as his grin widened, ****"The Night Fury.**"**

Hiccup gulped loudly, which seemed to only confirm the Red Death's suspicions.

****"I should have swallowed that miserable newt when he was a hatchling,**"** the Red Death sighed as it shook its massive head, ****"You live and you learn, as you humans say.**"**

****"Speaking of living,**"** the Red Death continued, leaning down to get closer to the teens, ****"As much as I've enjoyed our little talk, I think our conversation is at an end.**"**

The teens began to inch away from the Red Death, which loomed over them.

"**I know your father, the one they call the Vast, has been searching for my nest," **the Red Death said to Hiccup, "**I'm tempted to let you go running back to him, so he'll come here and I can enjoy roasting him in my own nest while putting your line to an end once and for all.**"

The Red Death crouched down lower, his massive mouth only a few yards away from the teens as the auburn flames in his mouth began to glow brighter.

"**But I think not,**" the Red Death stated with a particularly fiendish grin, "**I wouldn't want you running back to the hag.**"

"Ye mean Hilde, daenae ye?" Merida said, flinching as the Red Death's six eyes turned towards her, "W-Whit dae ye want with her?"

"**The hag and I have a long, storied history," **the Red Death replied, "**All you need to know is when I finally have her, I will be free of this place. And when I am, the Norselands will be the first to burn. I promise you that.**"

Turning back towards Hiccup, the Red Death's grin grew as flames danced in the back of his throat.

"**So tell me, Siegfriedson," **the Red Death inquired, "**How do you wish to die?***"

"Surrounded by the broken bodies of those who slew me is the standard Viking response, I believe," Hiccup mumbled as all the color drained from his face.

"**Sorry," **the Red Death apologized with a chuckle, "**Not an option.**"

"I was afraid you'd say something like that," Hiccup replied as he and his friends began backing away while the Red Death pulled back, his mouth filling with flames.

Just as the Red Death opened his mouth to spew fire on the teens, a large boulder came falling from above, striking the dragon on the head and shattering, the sudden impact causing his shot to go wide, scorching a large section of wall as the teens leapt clear. Snarling in agitation, the Red Death turned his attention upwards, where he saw Toothless, Boudica and Meatlug on a ledge far above him, the three dragons working in unison to dislodge another boulder and push it over the ledge.

"**YOU!" **the Red Death roared hatefully, "**I should have known you were skulking around in the shadows!***"

In response, Toothless gave the boulder a hard shove, causing the boulder to go tumbling over the edge and off the cliff, falling directly towards the Red Death. Snarling, the Red Death opened its massive mouth and caught the boulder in its jaws before crushing the boulder between its teeth. Spitting the chunks of rock out of its mouth, the Red Death looked upwards and shot a giant fireball upwards with a mighty roar.

As the flames shot upwards, the runes that surrounded the cavern just above the Red Death's head glowed brightly before a field of shimmering red energy covered the opening. The flames slammed against the field, which did not budge under the assault, causing some of the flames to bounce back towards the Red Death and the teens. Roaring in rage, the Red Death began to turn his attention back towards the teens.

"**It matters not. I will still-" **the Red Death began to say but as he looked back to where the four teens had been standing moments before, he found that they had vanished. Looking around quickly, the Red Death quickly found the teens scrambling for one of the exits. Roaring in fury, the Red Death began charging after the teens, who were mere feet from the entrance into another one of the tunnels.

"JUMP!" Hiccup shouted as the Red Death fired another blast of fire at them. Leaping forward, the four teens dived into the tunnels, rolling across the hard stone as they landed. Pushing themselves up, they turned to look back into the chamber, their eyes widening in fear as a wall of flame came rushing towards them. A second before the flames reached them, a similar field as the one before covered the tunnel entrance, blocking the fire as it slammed against the red energy, the teens flinching unintentionally as it did.

"Come on!" Hiccup said as he pushed himself to his feet, urging his friends to do the same, "We have to get out of here!"

"**This isn't the end of it, Siegfriedson!" **the Red Death roared after the teens, his voice deafening as it echoed down the tunnel, the force knocking some stones loose, which crashed to the ground in the four's wake, "**I will be free and when I do, I will burn you and all you know to ASHES!"**

Reaching a point where the tunnel branched into two others, the teens stumbled to a halt as they tried to catch their breath.

"Did that really just happen?" Astrid asked in frightened bewilderment as she leaned against one of the rock walls, "Did we really just run into the Red Death?"

"Ah wud hae tae say sae since he bloody told us he was!" Merida snapped back at the other girl while she leaned with both hands against the stone, panting loudly.

"How are we going to get out of here?" Fishlegs questioned, the color still not having returned to his face.

"We go up is my best guess," Hiccup replied, resting his hands on his knees, "If we can get outside, I'm sure the dragons can find us."

As they finished talking, the sounds of feet pounding against stone and grunting voices shouting to one another echoed up to them from the other tunnels.

"Sounds like going up, isn't going to be easy," Astrid said as she gripped her waraxe.

"Did ye really think it was gaein' tae be?" Merida questioned as she slipped her bow around her shoulders and drew Dragonsbane from its

sheath.

"Come on," Hiccup stated, keeping Bemuhén in his hand as he began making his way down the tunnel that lead away from the approaching Vendal, "This way!"

Running down the tunnel, the teens set a steady pace, doing their best to stay ahead of their pursuers. Happily, the tunnel began to meander upwards, snaking its way back towards the surface of the Nest.

"Ah can smell th' ocean!" Merida exclaimed happily.

"I can hear the waves!" Astrid added, a sense of relief washing over her.

Rounding a bend in the tunnel, the four teens came across a larger chamber with multiple tunnels leading into it. Directly across from them a large chunk of stone had fallen away, allowing them to see the night sky hanging over the ocean beyond.

"We made it!" Fishlegs shouted for joy as he made his way towards the opening. As he did, a Vendal suddenly came shrieking out of the shadows, leaping up and jumping onto Fishlegs in an effort to wrestle the large Viking to the ground, Fishlegs yelling in fear as the Vendal clung to his back.

"Fishlegs!" Astrid screamed as she moved to try and help him

"Look oot!" Merida shouted, reaching out and grabbing the back of Astrid's shirt before yanking the other girl backwards just in time to avoid another Vendal as he came rushing out and swung his club in the space that Astrid had been standing in. Quickly glancing around, Merida saw more Vendal rushing in from every direction, bring their numbers up to a dozen.

"Hiccup!" Merida shouted in warning.

"I see them! I see them!" Hiccup yelled back as a Vendal rushed at him. The barbarian leapt into the air and swung at Hiccup, the young man stepping to the side to avoid the blow. As the Vendal landed, Hiccup step forward and kicked the savage hard in the side, causing the man to stumble away, holding his ribs.

Glancing to his side, Hiccup saw a second Vendal running towards him, armed with a rusty iron sword. The Vendal slashed down savagely at Hiccup, forcing the young man to parry with his own sword. As Bemuhén met the other blade, the rusty iron cracked against the fine steel. As the Vendal tried to pull his weapon back, he found himself unable to. Grunting in confusion and irritation, the Vendal pulled back harder, giving Hiccup an opening to kick him right between the legs. The Vendal let out a painful gasp as he doubled over in pain and dropped his sword clattering against the stone floor, the blade breaking in two. Growling, Hiccup lashed out with a punch, the Vendal barely noticing as the fist connected with his jaw. Hiccup let out a yelp of pain and shook his now sore hand before turning back towards the Vendal, grabbed the man's head and drove his knee into the savage's face, knocking the barbarian onto his back with a broken nose. Hiccup let out another yelp of pain and began hopping around on one foot, clutching his knee in pain.

As Hiccup rubbed his injured knee, a third Vandal rushed him. Hiccup had just enough time to get his sword up before the Vandal slammed into them, knocking them both to the ground. As they hit the ground, the Vandal suddenly let out a pained wheeze before he went very still. Hiccup looked at the Vandal in confusion before he felt a warm sticky substance touched his hand. Hesitantly, he looked past the Vandal's shoulder and saw that when the Vandal had slammed into him, he had accidentally impaled himself onto Bemuhén's blade. Hiccup's face paled as he watched blood run down the saber's blade. Grunting, Hiccup pushed the Vandal off of him, looking at his sword sticking out of the Vandal's chest, before turning his eyes towards his hands, which were soaked with the man's blood, as were his clothes. Reaching out, he grabbed the hilt of his sword before pulling it out of the Vandal. Hiccup took a few deep calming breathes as he looked at the bloody sword in his trembling hands.

As Hiccup tried to process what had just occurred, the first Vandal that had attacked him turned back around and rushed towards the young Viking again. Snarling, the Vandal rushed at him with a raised club. Hearing the Vandal's roar caused Hiccup to snap out of his thoughts, prompting him to spin around and swing Bemuhén at the Vandal, attempting to parry the blow. Instead, he hit the Vandal's wrist and Bemuhén cut off the man's hand with a single swing. Hiccup looked on in shock as the Vandal went stumbling by, clutching the bloody stump where his hand had been. The Vandal fell to his knees, looking from his wrist to Hiccup, before his face turned pale and he fell to the ground. Hiccup could only look on with a mixture of shock and nausea, blood slowly dripping off the tip of his sword.

As Merida pulled Astrid back, she stepped in front of the other girl as the Vandal who had attacked the blonde. Snarling, the Vandal swung his club at Merida who parried the blow with Dragonsbane. Moving the Vandal's club to the side, she spun her sword around before slamming Dragonsbane's hilt into the savage's face, breaking his nose and causing him to stumble away. As the Vandal reeled, Merida swept at his leg with her broadsword, slicing his calf and knocking him off his feet. The Vandal slammed hard onto his back grunting in pain as his club slid from his grasp. Before he could recover, Merida stepped over him and drove the point of her sword into the Vandal's chest, killing him.

As Merida pulled her sword out of the Vandal's chest, another rushed forward to attack her. Before she could bring her sword up to block the attack, Astrid stepped in front of her and knocked the blow away with her axe. Spinning her axe around, Astrid slammed the butt of its handle into the Vandal's gut, causing him to double over as the air was knocked out of his lungs. Spinning her axe around again, she wrapped her handle around the Vandal's neck before kicking the Vandal in the back of his knees. As the Vandal fell to his knees, Astrid pulled hard against the savage's neck, strangling him. The Vandal tried to desperately push Astrid off, but the blonde gave a quick twist of her axe, cracking the Vandal's neck and causing him to fall to the ground limply.

Astrid stared down at the Vandal's limp form for a moment, a lost look in her eye. Slowly she turned to look at Merida who nodded at her. After she did, Astrid's eyes widened as she looked behind Merida.

"Behind you!" Astrid shouted, pointing just behind Merida. Spinning around, Merida found a Vendal bearing down on her, his club raised. Lifting her sword to block, Merida tried to parry the blow, but the Vendal smacked her sword away, sending Dragonsbane clattering across the ground. Taking a step back, Merida looked at her sword in a panic before turning her attention back towards the Vendal just as he took a follow up swing at her. Hopping back, Merida avoided the blow before stepping forward and punched the Vendal hard in the face. As the Vendal stumbled backwards, Merida stepped forward and punched the man hard in the gut, causing him to double over in pain. As the Vendal reeled, Merida unslung her bow and spun around before swinging the bow upwards, striking the Vendal hard in the face and knocking him off his feet, causing him to slam hard onto his back. As the Vendal pushed himself up, Merida rushed up and kicked him hard in the face, knocking the savage out.

As Astrid watched Merida fight with the Vendal, a second suddenly came up behind the blonde, wrapping his arms around the young woman's shoulders. Astrid struggled with the Vendal for a few moments, the savage growling in her ear before she slammed the heel of her boot onto the top of the man's foot. As the Vendal howled in pain, Astrid quickly snapped her head back, smashing it into the Vendal's nose. The Vendal quickly released Astrid, lifting his hands to cover his now bleeding nose. Before he could, Astrid reached up and grabbed the Vendal before she flipped him over her shoulder, slamming the savage against the ground. As the Vendal tried to recover, Astrid lifted her axe and spun it around before slamming it down on the man, killing him.

Before Astrid could pull her axe out, another Vendal rushed at her and swung his club at the blonde. Hopping back, Astrid avoided the blow before raising her fists as she eyed the Vendal. Snarling, the Vendal charged at Astrid again, swinging his club at her head. Astrid quickly ducked beneath the blow before delivering a quick jab to the Vendal's midsection. The Vendal grunted in pain, holding his side as he stumbled back. Roaring, the Vendal took a swing at Astrid for a third time. In response, Astrid stepped to the side, avoiding the blow. Reaching out, Astrid grabbed the Vendal's arm and yanked it towards her while simultaneously driving her knee into the man's stomach. As the Vendal doubled over in pain, Astrid grabbed the sides of his head and drove her knee into his face, breaking his nose. As the Vendal screamed in pain, Astrid grabbed his flailing arm again before yanking the Vendal back towards while lifting her leg up and driving her foot into the Vendal's chest, pushing her foot forward and slamming the Vendal onto the ground. As the Vendal groaned in pain, Astrid gave it a quick kick in the shoulder, snapping the bone. The Vendal screamed in agony, quickly silenced as Astrid punched him in the face.

As Astrid stood up, she looked down at the three Vendal she had defeated. Stepping over to second, she grabbed her axe and pulled it out, failing to notice another Vendal coming up behind with a dagger raised. Before it could strike, a twang sounded before an arrow whizzed over Astrid's shoulder and struck the Vendal between the eyes, which rolled back into the savage's head as he fell to the ground. Astrid spun around and looked at the Vendal in surprise before turning to look at Merida, who was slowly lowering her bow, the string still humming from the released energy. Astrid's look of surprise was slowly replaced with an appreciative smirk as she nodded at Merida.

Fishlegs screamed in panic as he tried to get the flailing Vendal off of his back. Reaching up, he grabbed ahold of the Vendal before flipping him over his shoulder and slammed the savage against the ground. Still holding the stunned Vendal, Fishlegs glanced over and saw two more running at him. Tightening his grip on the Vendal's shoulders, Fishlegs spun around once before tossing it at the other Vendal, sending all three crashing to the ground. As the Vendal tried to recover, Fishlegs quickly grabbed his warhammer, watching the three savages nervously.

Snarling, one of the Vendal rushed Fishlegs with his club raised. Fishlegs quickly raised his hammer, blocking the blow with the weapons handle. Pushing against the Vendal, Fishlegs shoved the other man back, causing the savage to stumble a few feet. Pressing his advantage, Fishlegs stepped forward and took a powerful swing with his hammer. The heavy iron hammerhead hit the Vendal hard on the shoulder, the bones shattering as the blow sent the Vendal rolling across the ground.

The first Vendal quickly leapt at Fishlegs again, his clawed hands outstretched as he lunged at the Viking teen. Lifting his hammer up, Fishlegs managed to catch the Vendal on his weapon's handle, leaving the Vendal dangling in the air as it swiped at Fishlegs with its clawed hands. Thinking quickly, Fishlegs spun around and slammed the Vendal against the stone walls of the chamber. Dazed, the Vendal slipped off of Fishlegs' hammer and slumped to the ground, trying to regain it sense. Acting quickly, Fishlegs stepped forward and slammed his hammer against the wall, causing a large chunk of stone to dislodge from the ceiling and crash down onto the Vendal, burying him.

Roaring, the final Vendal charged at Fishlegs, swinging his club at the young Viking in a mad frenzy, forcing him to back peddle in order to avoid the assault. As Fishlegs defended against attack, he slipped on a loose stone, barely stopping himself from falling to the ground. This gave the Vendal the opening it needed and Fishlegs suddenly found the savage's club connecting with the side of the young Viking's head. Rolling onto his hands and knees, the force of the blow having stunned him, Fishlegs tried to regain his bearings as blood dripped down the side of his face. Glancing up, Fishlegs caught sight of the Vendal standing over him, the savage raising his club to bring it down on the blonde's head.

All at once, Fishlegs saw red as an indescribably anger swelled up in him. As the Vendal swung the weapon down, Fishlegs reached up and grabbed the savage's arm, stopping the attack. Letting out a shout of fury, Fishlegs yanked on the Vendal's arm, pulling the barbarian off his feet and slamming him onto the ground. Before the Vendal could recover, Fishlegs slammed one of his meaty fists against the savage's face. Fishlegs quickly followed up with two more punches, snarling as he left the Vendal's face a bloody mess. Still seething in pain and anger, Fishlegs quickly stood up and grabbed his hammer before spinning around and slamming it onto the Vendal's chest with an angry roar.

For a few moments, Fishlegs stood in place, panting heavily as he looked at the slain Vendal, the head of his hammer resting against the man's now broken chest. As his anger left him, a look of shock crossed his face as he observed the destruction he had caused. For a

long moment, Fishlegs stares at the Vandal's body as blood begins to pool around it, before a hand on his shoulder snaps him back to reality.

"Fishlegs?" Astrid says, a note of concern in her voice as she rests her hand on the young man's shoulder, "Are you alright?"

"Huh?" he asked, turning his head to look at her as he blinks himself out of his daze, "Y-Yeahâ€¦I'm okay."

"You're bleeding," Astrid comments as she reaches up and touches the wound on the side of Fishlegs' head.

"Ouch!" Fishlegs hisses as he flinches away from Astrid's touch.

"Sorry!" Astrid replies, pulling her hand away, the tips of her fingers red with Fishlegs blood, "That was stupid."

"It's okay," Fishlegs replied, waving off her apology, "Just stings a little is all."

Fishlegs went quiet as his eyes fell back towards the Vandal's body, a lost look forming on his face.

"This is the first time I've killed someone too," Astrid spoke up, causing Fishlegs to blink in surprise as he turned back to look at her.

"My mother says it always hits you hardest the first time," Astrid continued, looking right into Fishlegs' eyes as she spoke, "If it doesn't thenâ€¦then honestly, there's something wrong with you."

"How do you feel?" Fishlegs questioned.

"â€¦Emptyer than I felt before," Astrid replied after a moment of thinking, "Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," Fishlegs answered with a nod, "That's exactly how I feel."

Astrid nodded back at Fishlegs, a look of understanding passing between them

"Hey guys," Hiccup spoke up with a breathless voice, bringing their attention to him, "I hate to interrupt this moment between you two, but we still kind of have a problem here."

"An' it's about tae get bigger," Merida moaned as she looked down one of the tunnels, seeing Mor'du barreling towards them with a mob of Vandal hot on his heels.

"What do we do!?" Fishlegs exclaimed, a panicked look on his face.

"We hae tae get oot o' here!" Merida replied as she rushed over to the others.

"But how!?" Astrid demanded, "Where do we go?"

Hiccup looked like he was about to say something, but stopped when he heard a high pitched whistling coming from outside.

"Everybody down!" Hiccup shouted as he fell to the ground, prompting the others to do the same. A second later, Toothless came swooping in, landing on the opening to the outside before shooting a blast of plasma down the tunnel at Mor'du. The blast hit Mor'du square in the chest, knocking the Demon Bear off his feet and sending him flying back into the other Vendal, knocking them all down. As the Vendal tried to pick themselves up, Toothless barked at the teens as they pushed themselves back to their feet.

"Come on!" Hiccup urged as he quickly climbed up onto Toothless' back before the Night Fury swooped back outside. As he did, Mor'du picked himself back up, his chest still smoking from where the fireball hit him. Snarling in fury, he began to charging up the tunnel after the teens as Meatlug landed in the opening. Fishlegs quickly climbed up onto Meatlug's back before turning to offer Astrid his hand. As he did, he caught sight of Mor'du rapidly approaching them.

"Merida!" Fishlegs shouted in warning as Astrid grabbed his hand.

"Ah see him!" Merida yelled back as she nocked an arrow in her bow, "Gae!"

As Fishlegs pulled Astrid up onto Meatlug's back, Merida turned to face Mor'du, pulling her arrow back and firing it as Meatlug buzzed away. Snarling, Mor'du batted the arrow away with his fist like it was a fly, not breaking stride as he charged at Merida. Face paling in fear, Merida quickly turned and raced towards the opening, hoping up on a rock as Mor'du reached her. Vaulting off the rock, Merida leapt through the opening as Mor'du snatched at her with one of his massive hands, his pointed finger nails just grazing her hair as she fell into the open air. Merida let out a scream of fear as she fell through the air, her arms pinwheeling as she went. Seconds before she hit the rocks below, Boudica came shooting by, snatching Merida as she went by.

Mor'du could only stand and watch as Merida climbed onto Boudica's back and went flying off with the others.

"Get the boats," Mor'du growled to the Vendal as they surrounded him, absentmindedly picking some burnt flesh off of his chest, "It's far past time for us to pay the witch a visit."

A/N: So this chapter was a blast to write, which is probably why it ended up being so long! Finally got to show off my villains after a while of not seeing them and gave the Red Death his big debut! Obviously, as many of you probably picked up on, the Red Death's characterization owes a lot to the depiction of Smaug in the new Hobbit movie. I was always planning on having the Red Death talk in this story, due to a combination of the books and my preference for villains whose motivations go beyond hunger. Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

****Chapter 29: Aftermath****

"Okay, so I don't know about you guys but I have a lot of questions right now," Astrid said as the three dragons landed in a clearing back on Berk, "Like, why are the Vandal feeding the Red Death, and why are the dragons going along with it? Plus, who trapped the Red Death with those runes?"

"Ah daenae know th' answer tae those first two questions," Merida said as she dismounted from Boudica's back, "But Ah'm pretty sure Ah know th' answer tae th' third."

"Come on," Hiccup said, dismounting as well before heading into the forest, Merida and Fishlegs following along with the three dragons, leaving Astrid behind, watching them leave in confusion.

"Where are you all going!?" Astrid called after them, before throwing her hands up in exasperation and following them.

The group made their way through the woods, crashing through the brush and hopping over rocks and fallen logs. Dodging around trees, the group made their way deeper and deeper into forest.

"Where are we?" Astrid asked as the group stumbled to a stop.

"I don't know," Hiccup replied, glancing around.

"You don't know?" Astrid questioned incredulously.

"No, I don't," Hiccup answered, turning around and looking Astrid right in the eye, "And that's exactly where we want to be."

Astrid just stopped and stared at Hiccup for a few moments, a completely bewildered look on her face.

"What the Hel does that mean!?" Astrid shouted, throwing her hands into the air in exasperation.

"Hiccup!" Merida spoke up before anyone could answer Astrid's question, parting some thick bushes as she did, "This way!"

Turning, Hiccup and Fishlegs moved over to join Merida before the three of them entered the bush, Fishlegs signaling for Astrid to follow them as he entered the brush with the dragons in tow. Astrid watched them leave for a moment before sighing and following. Pushing her way through the bush, she gasped in surprise as she came into a clearing where a circle of standing stones greeted her.

"Whatâ€¦?" Astrid pondered aloud, "I never knew something like this was out here."

"Astrid!" Fishlegs shouted, catching the girl's attention as he and the others made their way down the small path leading away from the standing stones, "Come on!"

Sparing one last glance at the stone monoliths, Astrid jogged over towards where the others were waiting, goose bumps spreading over her flesh as she briefly passed through the stone circle. Quickly, the group made their way down the path before coming to the small

clearing where Hilde's cottage was.

"Wait, someone lives out here!?" Astrid questioned in astonishment, "How come I never knew someone lived out here?"

Ignoring Astrid's questions, Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs walked up to Hilde's front door, Hiccup reaching out and knocking on it.

"Hilde?" Hiccup called out, knocking again as he did, "Are you there?"

"Who the Hel is Hilde?" Astrid questioned as she watched the others with a look of utter bafflement on her face.

"Zat would be me, dearie," Hilde said from behind Astrid, causing the blonde to jump nearly a foot off the ground as she let out a startled shriek. Grabbing her axe, Astrid spun around to face the old woman with her weapon raised.

"Is zis how you normally treat an old voman, dear?" Hilde questioned, raising her eyebrow at Astrid.

"Umâ€¦ahâ€¦no," Astrid replied, lowering her axe as she caught her breath while averting her eyes, "Sorry, it's beenâ€¦kind of a long night for me."

"I imagine," Hilde replied before turning her attention to the other three teens who were making their way over to them, "Hello dearies, I see you've brought some friends."

"Uh, yeah," Hiccup replied before turning his attention to the trio of dragons that were accompanying them, "You've met Toothless, and our new friends here are Boudica and Meatlug."

The two dragons leaned forward and took curious sniffs in the direction of the old woman. Looks of surprise and confusion passed over the two dragons' faces before they glanced at each other and then to Toothless, who nodded his head at the two of them.

"All rightâ€¦" Hiccup said, looking at the three dragons in confusion for a moment before turning his attention to Astrid, "And this is our friend, Astrid."

"Astrid?" Hilde questioned skeptically as she turned her attention towards the girl in question, "Is zat vat you're calling yourself?"

A look of surprise passed over Astrid's features before she blushed in embarrassment and averted her eyes for a second time. The others glanced at one another in confusion while shooting Astrid questioning glances which the blonde pointedly ignored.

"Don't vorry, dearie," Hilde whispered, reaching out and patting Astrid on the arm sympathetically, "Zey don't hafe to know if you don't vant zem to."

"But how do you know?" Astrid asked in confusion, taking a hesitant step away from Hilde and not truly lowering her axe as she did so, "I've lived on this island my entire life and I have never heard of anyone living out here. Who are you?"

"My name is Hilde," the old woman replied with a smile, "And I'm just a simple woodcarver."

"Bullshit you are," Astrid snapped, her annoyance rising as she narrowed her eyes at the older, "Like I said, I've never met you before in my life and I doubt these three would come running to you with dragons in tow if you were just a woodcarver."

"Fery perceptife of you," Hilde commented with a smirk, "Vhy is it zat your little friends hafent brought you around before?"

"I'm just finding out about all of this," Astrid explained, "Like I said, it's been a very long night."

"Which is why we wanted tae come tae ye, Hilde," Merida spoke up as she approached the older woman, "We need tae talk tae ye."

"Vat do you need to talk with me about?" Hilde questioned as she lead them all into her house, Astrid taking it all in as she stepped inside. The three dragons waited outside, sniffing around the area around Hilde's home in curiosity.

"We foundâ€|the Nest," Hiccup explained, "The dragons' Nest."

"Zat must hafe been exciting for you," Hilde replied, but Merida noticed her tense up slightly.

"It was more terrifying than anything," Hiccup continued, keeping a close eye on Hilde as well, "We found something in the Nest."

"Vat would zat be?" Hilde asked as she turned her back to the group, busying herself with some items on a shelf.

"The Vendal have apparently moved in to the Nest along with the dragons," Hiccup continued, glancing at Merida, who looked back to him and gave him an encouraging nod, "It seemed like they were taking care of something."

"And did you find vat zat somezing vas?" Hilde questioned.

"Yes," Hiccup said solemnly, "The Red Death."

Hilde dropped a cup that she had been holding at the moment, causing it to clatter against the ground.

"Zat must hafe been surprising," Hilde said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"It was," Hiccup stated with a nod, "But what was more surprising was the fact that he could talk and he told us that you had sealed him there."

"You talked vith him, did you?" Hilde questioned, turning to face the teens again, watching them with her mismatched eyes, "You're lucky to be alive."

"We are," Merida agreed, "But 'at's beside th' point Hilde. Whit is gaein' on here? How are ye involved in this?"

"It is a long, andâ€¦terrible shtory," Hilde explained, a faraway look in her eyes as she spoke before snapping back to look at the teens, "Vat is important is zat you know zat I vas indeed zee one who sealed away zee Red Death."

"But the Red Death hasn't been seen in generations," Astrid spoke up, clearly confused, "For that to have been you, you'd have to beâ€¦"

Astrid paused before a look of astonishment came over her face as she regarded Hilde.

"How old are you?" Astrid questioned, narrowing her eyes at Hilde.

"Old," Hilde answered with a tired sigh as she sat in one of the wooden chair, "Very old."

"But how could you be that old," Astrid pressed, still trying to put everything together, "Are youâ€¦"

"A witch?" Fishlegs finished, giving Hilde a pointed look.

"I zink you know zee answer to zat question, Leser," Hilde replied with a wry smile, "I zink you've known for quite some time."

"To answer your question zough, Krieger," Hilde continued, turning her attention towards Astrid again, "I hafe been called many zings in my time and vitch is indeed one of zem."

"O-Okay," Astrid said nervously, playing with the handle of her axe as she leaned towards Fishlegs, "What did she just call me?"

"Krieger," Fishlegs repeated back to her, "It means warrior in Old Norse, I think."

"Why would she call me that?" Astrid questioned.

"It's kind of her thing," Fishlegs explained, "She's good at reading people and gives them names based on that. I think it's part of the wholeâ€¦magic thing she's got going on."

"Okay," Astrid said while slowly nodding, "What's yours mean?"

"Leser means reader," Fishlegs elaborated, "Merida's is Jaeger, which means hunter, and Hiccup's is Reiter."

"What's that one mean?" Astrid asked.

"Rider," Fishlegs answered, to which Astrid turned to fully face him and quirked an eyebrow at the taller boy, "Yeah, now you see what I've been dealing with lately."

"Sae 'at's whit happened tae th' Red Death?" Merida asked, "Ye sealed him away?"

"Yes," Hilde replied with a nod, "And I hafe no doubt he's looking for me still."

"Not just him," Hiccup stated, "Mor'du and the Vandal are looking for you too. They're helping the Red Death, but for the life of me I can't understand why."

"Mor'du has much to gain with zee Red Death's release," Hilde stated plainly, her eyes having a faraway look in them again, "As do others."

"Others?" Merida questioned in confusion, "What others?"

"Zere are zose who would make zee Red Death zeir ally," Hilde explained, looking intensely into Merida's eyes as she spoke, "Rising shadows zat hafe not been seen in an age."

"What should we do?" Hiccup asked, a worried look on his face.

"Zere is only one sing zat can be done," Hilde replied, turning her attention to Hiccup, "Zee Red Death must be slain."

"Slain!?" Fishlegs shouted incredulously, "You want us to slay the Red Death? Not even Siegfried the Great could do that. Not even you could do that and you're the one who sealed him away!"

"Yes," Hilde relented with a nod, "But you all hafe sings zat neither I nor Siegfried had."

"What?" Hiccup questioned, "The dragons?"

"Not just your dragons," Hilde explained, "Your skills, your knowledge, your training. You hafe been training all your lifes to fight dragons, somesing not even Siegfried himself could boast. Reiter has created sings zat no one efer has before."

"Nothing that can stop something like the Red Death," Hiccup argued, feeling nervous as the others turned to look at him.

"You'd be surprised," Hilde pressed, "You and Jaeger possess zee noble bloodlines stemming from kings and queens of old."

She paused as she shot Astrid a knowing look.

"And you are not zee only ones with ancestors of note," Hilde commented without elaboration, Astrid looking at her shoes as she ground a piece of dirt under her toe.

"And in addition to all of zat, you hafe zee power of two peoples behind you," Hilde finished, looking at Hiccup and Merida again.

"As much as I'm sure my dad will love to kill the Red Death, I don't think that he will be willing to work with other dragons to do it," Hiccup stated, clearly unconvinced, "We come to him with this, and he'll kill Toothless and the other dragons and banish us. If he doesn't decide to just kill us too."

"You schould hafe more trust in your fazer," Hilde said, a concerned look on her face.

"Why?" Hiccup questioned, growing irritated, "Everything he's ever done tells me what he's going to do."

"Then we waenae jist tell him," Merida replied, "Like Ah said afore, ma father trusts me an' ma mother trusts ye. When it comes right down tae it, it might nae matter whit yer father thinks."

Hiccup looked unconvinced but couldn't think of a way to argue.

"Hic, ye know as well as Ah dae 'at saemethin' has tae be done," Merida pleaded, turning to Hiccup and reaching out, taking his hands in hers, "Th' Vendal are gaein' tae dae everythin' they can tae release th' Red Death. They'll come fer Hilde tae get her tae release th' seal. Mor'du said they already know she's here on th' island. He will burn it tae th' ground if it means getting' tae her. Ye know he will."

A concerned look crossed Hiccup's face as he thought of what Merida was saying.

"And it's not just the people of Berk who have something to lose," Fishlegs spoke up, drawing everyone's attention to him, "It's pretty clear that the dragons in the Nest are being enslaved. The whole reason they have been raiding us and gods know who else is to feed the Red Death. You saw how our dragons reacted when we got close to the Nest. I think the Red Death is somehow controlling them."

"Like the queen in a beehive," Astrid stated.

"Exactly," Fishlegs replied, shooting Astrid a smile to which the blonde replied with a smirk before he turned his attention back to the others, "And that goes all without mentioning what Mor'du does to the dragons that don't bring back enough food."

Hiccup looked lost as he thought over what they all had told him.

"Hiccup," Astrid spoke up, leaning forward against a wooden table as she looked intensely into his eyes as he turned to look at her, "They're right. The Red Death, Mor'du, the Vendal. They have to be stopped. For our sake, our people's sake and even the dragons' sakes."

A warm smile broke Astrid's features as she paused.

"You've convinced me," Astrid pressed gently, "I think you can handle your dad."

Hiccup looked at Astrid for a few moments, before turning his attention to Fishlegs, who smiled and nodded at him. Nodding back, Hiccup turned his attention back to Merida, who smiled at him, giving his hands a reassuring squeeze.

"Alright," Hiccup relented, squeezing Merida's hands in return, "Alright, we'll do it."

His friends nodded and smiled at one another.

"But we have to do this the right way," Hiccup continued, a serious look on his face, "If we don't, this could all blow up in our faces and we will have more than just Mor'du and the Red Death to worry

about. And I don't know about you guys but that already seems like a ridiculous amount to worry about."

His friends chuckled at his joke and nodded their agreement.

"Thanks for clearing some things up for us, Hilde," Hiccup said, turning his attention towards the old woman, "I hope you're right about all of this."

"I know I am," Hilde replied, smiling at Hiccup as she reached out and placed a hand on his arm, "You are destined for great sings, Hiccup. You just hafe to trust in yourself."

"I think that's the first time you've called me by my real name," Hiccup commented with a chuckle.

"We all hafe many names, Reiter," Hilde replied enigmatically, "All of zem are correct in zeir own vays."

Hiccup wasn't sure what to say to that, so he merely reached out and patted Hilde's hand before turning back to his friends.

"As it is, we won't be able to do anything about the Red Death and the Vendal until Merida's parents arrive from the Highlands," Hiccup stated, "So right now, let's just worry about getting Boudica and Meatlug back into their pens."

"Do we really hae tae bring them back?" Merida questioned, looking saddened by the news.

"We don't want to raise suspicion until we can explain all of this to our parents," Hiccup explained, "I don't like it either, but two dragons suddenly missing from the arena will raise a lot of suspicion."

Merida sighed in resignation but nodded in understanding. Standing up from her seat, she turned and smiled at Hilde.

"Daenae worry, Hilde," Merida said, a look of determination in her eyes, "We wonae let 'at monster get his hands on ye."

"I feel safer already," Hilde replied with a smile, "Now, zee hour grows late and I believe you four hafe places to be."

Nodding, the four teens quickly exited the house while bidding Hilde good night. As the teens were rejoined by the trio of dragons outside, a thought occurred to Astrid.

"Hey wait," Astrid said, a look of confusion on her face as she began to turn back around, "How do we-"

Astrid stopped mid-sentence as she finished turning around, finding that Hilde's house had completely disappeared, and one of the monoliths that made up the standing stone circle was looming in its place. Astrid stood stock still for a moment as she stared at the monolith.

"â€|What," she said blankly after a moment.

"Yeah," Fishlegs stated as she walked up behind her, looking at the

monolith as well, "That was my reaction too."

"I don't think I like magic," Astrid said, slowly turning to look at Fishlegs.

"Join the club," Fishlegs replied as he turned around and began following the others as they made their way back to the village, Astrid taking a moment to stare at the monolith some more before turning around and jogging after the others.

"You three bring the dragons back to the arena," Hiccup said, indicating towards where the village was, "I'm going to go bring Toothless back to his cove for the night."

"Alright," Merida replied, reaching out and taking Hiccup's hand before pulling him towards her so she could quickly peck him on the lips, "Be careful."

"You too," Hiccup replied with a smile, before turning and leading Toothless into the woods. Merida watched him go for a moment, before turning to face Fishlegs and Astrid, who were looking at her with matching smiles on their faces.

"Whit?" Merida questioned in confusion.

"You two are so adorable, it's a little bit sickening," Astrid commented as she crossed her arms and chuckled.

"Now you can see the other thing I've been dealing with lately," Fishlegs said, indicating towards Merida, prompting Astrid to chuckle again.

"Ye know, me an' Hic arenae th' only adorable anes around here," Merida commented, giving Astrid and Fishlegs a knowing look before walking past them towards the village, the two dragons following behind her. As they left, Astrid and Fishlegs glanced at each other before quickly looking away again, blushes coloring their cheeks as they both moved to follow Merida back to the village.

It didn't take them long to get back to the village and with the late hour and half the guards asleep at their posts, it proved easy to get the dragons back into the arena.

"Alright girl, Ah'll see ye real soon, okay?" Merida cooed as she stroked the top of Boudica's head, the Nadder purring in reply as she allowed herself to be lead back into the pen. Meanwhile, Fishlegs was scratching Meatlug's belly, the Gronckle kicking his legs in excitement as he lay on the floor of his pen.

"Alright Fishlegs, we shud close them up," Merida said, prompting the young man to exit the pen and close them both up, sealing the dragons in. Fishlegs and Merida smiled at each other before turning to face Astrid, who was sitting against a wall of the arena. Looking up at them, Astrid pushed herself to her feet as she sighed wistfully.

"Thisâ€¦is officially the craziest night of my life," Astrid said as she regarded Merida and Fishlegs with a small smile, "I rode a dragon. We found the Nest. Hel, we found the Red Death himself! And we know it's him because he told us!"

Astrid laughed a bit to herself, before her mood became noticeably somber.

"And then Iâ€¦I killed someone," Astrid said, her voice barely above a whisper as she looked down at her feet, "Three someones actually."

An uneasy quiet fell over the trio as sad and lost looks crossed each of their faces.

"Weâ€¦we didnae hae a choice," Merida argued, rubbing one of her arms with her hand, "If we didnae kill them, they wud hae killed us."

"I know," Astrid insisted, raising her eyes to look at Merida, "I know. It's justâ€¦I can't tell anyone about any of it. I have to keep it a secret, because if I don't then three dragons might be killed."

"And the banishment," Fishlegs spoke up, "Don't forget about the banishment."

"Right, that too," Astrid said, giving Fishlegs a small smile, "But all I'm trying to say is, I have to keep all thisâ€¦mostly amazing stuff secret for reasons I would never have gone along with a few hours ago. But nowâ€¦now I'm okay with it. Now I see what you guys see and I appreciate the opportunity you guys gave me."

"We didnae really give ye choice in th' matter," Merida pointed out.

"Yeah," Fishlegs agreed as he scratched the back of his head, "We kind ofâ€¦kidnapped you, I guess."

"That's true," Astrid said with a nod as she stepped towards Fishlegs, "By the way."

Astrid lashed out, punching Fishlegs hard in the stomach, causing the large teen to double over in pain as air wheezed out of his lungs. Merida watched with wide eyes as Astrid pulled back and leaned over so she and Fishlegs were at eye level.

"Thatwas for kidnapping me," she said sternly.

Fishlegs wheezed some more as he turned to look at Merida, who could only offer a helpless shrug in reply. At the same time, a nervous look crossed Astrid's face as she brushed some of her bangs to the side. Reaching out, Astrid cupped Fishlegs' chin and turned his head back to face her. Before Fishlegs could say anything, Astrid leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. Fishlegs eyes shot open wide in surprise as Astrid held her lips against his for a moment before pulling away again, Merida watching the whole seen with a mixture of shock and amusement.

"And that was for everything else," Astrid continued, blushing as she stood up

Fishlegs didn't reply, a look of shock frozen on his face as he stayed doubled over, despite the pain in stomach having long left him.

"So, umâ€¦I'llâ€¦I'll see you guys tomorrow?" Astrid mumbled, her face turning redder by the second.

"Sure, Astrid," Merida snickered, biting her lip to keep from laughing out loud, "We'll see ye tomorrow."

"Okay," Astrid mumbled before quickly spinning around and running towards the exit of the arena, "Bye!"

"Bye," Merida replied, grinning as she waved to the fleeing girl, before turning her attention to Fishlegs, who was still frozen in place with a look of shock on his face. After a moment, he let out a long wheeze that sounded like a mixture of pain and shock.

"Ye okay, Fishlegs?" Merida questioned, placing a hand on Fishlegs' shoulder.

"Yeah," Fishlegs replied as he stood back up, placing a hand on his hips, trying to seem nonchalant as his face turned red, "Yeah, I'm okay."

There was a pause as Merida regarded Fishlegs with a bemused smile.

"Merida," Fishlegs said after a moment, "Can I ask you something?"

"Gae fer it, Fish," Merida replied, her grin never abating.

"What just happened?" Fishlegs questioned.

"Well, Ah think we hae our answer tae how Astrid feels aboot ye," Merida replied, reaching up and patting Fishlegs on the back as she began to lead him out of the arena, "Now, we shud be getting' back home."

"Right," Fishlegs agreed, walking with Merida for a short distance before speaking up again, "Merida, why are girls so weird?"

"Fishlegs, Ah'm a girl, an' even Ah daenae know th' answer tae 'at question," Merida replied with a chuckle before they exited the arena, closing the gate behind them.

_Later, _

Hiccup quietly snuck into the house, closing the door gently behind him. As he made his way towards the stairs, he saw Merida curled up near the fireplace, a fire burning low before her.

"Hey," Hiccup greeted her as he walked over and sat down next to her.

"Hey," Merida replied, smiling at him before cuddling up next to him, prompting Hiccup to put his arm around her shoulders, "Ye get Toothless back okay?"

"Yeah," Hiccup answered, "He didn't seem happy when I left though. I think everything that happened tonight has put him on edge."

"Ah daenae think he's th' only ane on edge," Merida replied, taking one of Hiccup's hands into one of hers as she looked up at him.

"A lot happen tonight, Mer," Hiccup answered, "We found the Nest, we discovered the Red Death and found out he had been sealed away by our friend who is apparently a centuries old witch."

"Ah daenae think 'at's th' only thin' 'at's botherin' ye though," Merida stated, reaching up and turning Hiccup's face so that he was looking at her, "Ye killed people tonight. We all did."

Hiccup remained silent, sighing softly as he adverted his eyes from hers.

"Iâ€¦I didn't even mean to," Hiccup whispered, "He was running at me then suddenly he was impaled on my sword. I didn't even do anything. The other one, I was trying to parry his attack and I ended up justâ€¦slicing his hand off. Heâ€¦He bled out right then and there."

"Ah understand, Hic," Merida stated, leaning her head against his shoulder, "Ye're ne'er th' same after it happens. It's hittin' the others hard too."

"It doesn't seem to be affecting you much," Hiccup observed.

"Because tonight wasnae th' first time Ah killed someane," Merida elaborated.

"What do you mean?" Hiccup asked in confusion as he looked down at her.

"Ye remember 'at Vendal raid 'at happened when Ah first came here?" Merida questioned.

"Of course," Hiccup replied, a concerned look on his face.

"Well, Ah killed ane o' th' Vendal when Ah was runnin' away from Mor'du," Merida explained, a faraway look in her eyes, "Ahâ€¦Ah stabbed him in th' throat with ane o' ma arras. Ah watched him bleed oot right in front o' me. Ah watched th' light die in his eyes."

"That couldn't have been easy," Hiccup said sympathetically.

"'At's th' scary thin'," Merida replied, looking Hiccup right in the eyes, "It was all too easy. Ye saw it taenight, they're there ane moment and th' next they're gone."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Hiccup asked.

"Because Ah didnae want tae," Merida replied with a sigh, "Ah wanted tae jist ferget about it."

"You can't justâ€¦forget about things like that, Mer," Hiccup stated.

"Ah know 'at now," Merida agreed with a nod, "'At's why Ah wanted tae

talk tae ye aboot this. Ah wanted ye tae know Ah'm here fer ye, jist like Ah know ye're here fer me."

"You didn't have to tell me that," Hiccup said as he held Merida closer to him, "I've known that for a while now."

"Good," Merida said, before she reached up, grabbed Hiccup's head and pulled him into a kiss, "'At's sae ye daenae ferget it."

Hiccup smiled as he settled down, resting his head on Merida's as she leaned back on his shoulder, watching the dying fire together.

"Speaking o' kisses," Merida spoke up, a grin spreading across her face, "Ye wonnae believe whit happened in th' arena after ye left."

A/N: Bit of a transition chapter here, lots of talking and character interaction. I hope you guys liked it! Also, this story has now passed eight hundred reviews. When I started this story a year ago, I never would have believed this story would end up being as popular as it is. Thank you all so much! You're the best fans a lowly fanfic writer like me could ask for! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

30. Reunion

Chapter 30: Reunion

Smoke slowly rose from the smithy near the center of the village as sounds of work echoed from inside. Within the building, Hiccup worked alone in the shadowy confines of the smithy, the inside illuminated by the glow of the forge as well as a few candles the young man had lit on his workbench.

Hiccup was currently looking over an arrow he had laying on his workbench. Picking it up, Hiccup examined it for a moment, looking at the small holes that ringed the point of the arrowhead. Grabbing a small, metal funnel sitting nearby, Hiccup fitted the tool into one of the holes before grabbing a leather pouch off the workbench and slowly pouring its contents, a fine black powder that smelt of sulfur. After the arrowhead was filled up, Hiccup took a moment to test the balance of the arrow before smiling to himself.

"Hiccup?" he heard Merida call before she pushed the door to the smithy open and stuck her head in, "Are ye in here?"

"Yeah, right here," Hiccup spoke up, looking up and smiling at her as he placed the arrow on his workbench, "Just working on something."

"Whit are ye workin' on?" Merida questioned, stepping inside and sitting on the edge of the workbench before picking up the arrow and examining it, "An arra?"

"An arrow filled with black powder," Hiccup explained, a smirk on his face.

"Why wud ye want saemethin' like 'at?" Merida questioned as she

hesitantly placed the arrow back on the workbench.

"It would pack an awfully big punch," Hiccup explained, a worried look passing over his face, "I have the feeling we're going to need something like that."

"Hey," Merida said, reaching out and placing a hand on Hiccup's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze, "Everythin' will be okay. Now come on, we need tae gae greet ma parents, they shud be arrivin' soon."

"Alright," Hiccup replied, wearing a nervous look as he stood from his stool as Merida slid off the workbench.

"Why dae ye look sae nervous?" Merida questioned as she reached out and took Hiccup's hand before leading him out of the smithy, "It's nae like ye haenae met ma parents afore."

"When I met them, things wereâ€¦a lot different between us," Hiccup explained, causing Merida's face to fall as she remembered, "Not that we should be dwelling on that, by any means. I'm just saying, now that you and I are reallyâ€¦"

"Taegether?" Merida provided helpfully, a small smile returning to her face.

"Exactly," Hiccup replied, smiling back at her as he gave her hand a squeeze, "Now that we're together, I'm really worried about what your family and friends really think of me."

"They think ye're wonderful, Hic!" Merida said with a laugh that managed to set Hiccup's heart aflutter.

"Y-Yeah well still," Hiccup stuttered, coughing into his hand to give him a pause to try and recollect his thoughts, "They didn't really stick around long enough to get to know me."

"Well, Ah like ye," Merida said simply, "Sae either they'll hae to get on board with 'at or they'll hae tae keep their incorrect opinions tae themselves."

"Thanks, Mer," Hiccup said warmly.

"O' course," Merida replied, pausing and turning to Hiccup to give him a quick peck on the lips, "Anythin' fer ye."

Before Hiccup could reply, the sound of a blaring horn came from one of the watchtowers along the coast.

"Longships!" the watchman called, "Highlanders! The Bear King approaches!"

"Come on!" Merida exclaimed excitedly, almost dragging Hiccup behind her as she rushed down towards the docks. A crowd of villagers had already begun to gather near the docks, watching as the four, large longships cut through the waters towards the island. Merida pushed and weaved her way through the crowd, pulling Hiccup along with her until they were at the front of the crowd. There they found Stoick standing at the front, watching the longships approach with his hands on his hips and a smile on his face, flanked by Gobber and Spitelout

with some of the other adults standing close by.

"There you two are!" Stoick exclaimed as he looked over his shoulder and spotted the two teenagers, "I was wonderin' where you had run off to!"

"Sorry," Hiccup apologized, "I was working on something in the smithy."

"Again?" Gobber commented with a laugh, "These days it seems like ye're in there more than Ah am."

"You excited to see yer folks again, girl?" Stoick questioned, looking at Merida with a crooked eyebrow.

"Ah am," Merida replied with a nod and a smile, excitement and happiness drowning out the mixture of feelings that had been swirling inside of her since her family's return was first announced.

"Doubt they'll recognize you," Stoick continued with a snort, "You're not the same girl they left with us."

"Actually Dad, she's the exact same girl they left us with," Hiccup replied, smiling at Merida, "We just brought it out for everyone to see."

Merida turned and beamed at Hiccup, a blush on her cheeks. She leaned in and gave him another quick kiss.

"Alright, enough of that now," Stoick said as he rolled his eyes, "We got important matters to take care of."

Turning back towards the docks, the teens could see the longships pulling in, retracting their oars and folding up their sails as they floated to a stop. As sailors quickly hopped off the boats and tied them to the docks, gang planks were run off the sides, allowing the passengers to disembark.

"Now presentin'â€¦!" a herald began to call before Fergus gave him a quick shove to quiet him as he pushed past.

"Ah, stow it, wud ye?" he commented as he glanced back at the herald, "They already know who we are!"

Fergus quickly turned his attention back to where he was walking as he approached Stoick.

"Stoick," Fergus greeted neutrally.

"Fergus," Stoick replied with a nod and a smirk.

"How's ma girl daein'?" Fergus asked.

"Why don't ye ask her yerself?" Stoick answered as he stepped back and indicated towards where Merida and Hiccup were standing. A look of surprise passed over Fergus' face as he looked at his daughter.

"Merida?" Fergus questioned in surprise, "Is 'at ye?"

"Aye, Da," Merida replied, chuckling as she stepped forward, "It's me."

"Well, whit are ye waitin' fer then?" Fergus asked with a laugh, "Come an' give yer auld man a hug!"

Giggling happily, Merida ran forward before hopping into her father's arms, the Bear King quickly scooping his daughter up into a bear hug. Pulling back, Fergus took a closer look at Merida.

"Sun above!" Fergus exclaimed, "They've turned ye intae a little Vikin', haenae they?"

"I'm startin' tae think there was always a little Vikin' in me, Da," Merida replied with a chuckle.

"Daenae let yer mother hear ye say 'at," Fergus replied with a snort before his face quickly fell, "Merida, abootâ€|"

"It's okay, Da," Merida reassured him, giving him a smile, "Ah'll talk tae her."

"Good girl," Fergus replied, setting Merida down as he looked over his shoulder and saw Elinor approaching. Stepping aside, Fergus watched as Elinor approached their daughter. Merida quickly smoothed out her clothes and tucked a stray hair behind her ear before hesitantly turning her attention towards Elinor. Her mother looked as regal as ever, dressed in a purple gown similar to the green one she was wearing when she had left, but her face was a neutral mask that barely hid the anxiety that Merida knew was there.

"Hello, Mother," Merida greeted her, hoping that speaking first would break any tension there was, "It's good tae see ye again."

"It's good tae see ye as well, Merida," Elinor greeted, moving at first to reach for Merida before pulling back and playing his her hands anxiously, "Ah hope 'at ye hae been daein' well."

"Ah hae," Merida answered with a nod, looking at the ground nervously, "Ah'm sorry Ah haenae been writin' home as much as Ah probably shud."

"Think naethin' o' it," Elinor replied, waving off the apology, "Ah-Ah'm sure ye've been very busy."

"Ah hae been," Merida replied as she hesitantly reached into her vest, pulling out a rolled up parchment and showing it to Elinor, "But Ah did hae time tae read yers."

Elinor pursed her lips as her eyes began to water.

"Ah'm sae sorry, Ma," Merida stated, her eyes beginning to water as well, "Ahâ€|Ah was sae awful tae ye."

"Ah'm sorry too, Merida," Elinor said, bringing her hand up and quickly wiping away a tear that threatened to run down her cheek, "Ah was nae th' mother Ah shud hae been. Ahâ€|Ah hit ye an'â€|"

"Ma, stop," Merida insisted, taking a step towards her mother, "Ah did a lot o' thin's tae deserve 'at. Ah fergive ye though, if ye'll

fergive me."

"O' course," Elinor replied, holding her arms out to her daughter as tears began to flow freely down her face, "Always."

Merida rushed forward and wrapped her arms around her mother, who quickly enveloped her with her own arms and held her close, quietly crying into each other's shoulders as the crowd watched.

Gobber sniffed and quickly rubbed a tear from his eye as he watched the scene.

"Are you crying?" Spitelout questioned, crooking an eyebrow at Gobber.

"Whit's it matter tae ye?" Gobber snapped back at him as he dug the palm of his good hand into his eye to clear it up.

After a moment, Merida and Elinor pulled away, each wiping tears away from their eyes.

"Ah love ye, Ma," Merida sniffed.

"Ah love ye too, ma little Boudica," Elinor replied, leaning forward and giving her daughter a kiss on her forehead.

Standing up straight again, Elinor looked around, a blush of embarrassment on her face as she saw everyone looking at her.

"Sun above," she whispered as he rubbed her red eyes again and smoothed out her dress, "Ah'm completely oot o' countenance."

"It's okay, dear," Fergus said, stepping over to his wife and placing his arm around her shoulder, "Ah think th' Vikin's are willin' tae let a little impropriety slide."

"I think we can overlook it," Stoick replied with a smirk and a nod, "It's good to see you again, Yer Majesty."

"Yeâ€|Ye as well, Chief Stoick," Elinor replied with a nod, before glancing back towards the longboats and smirking, "Ah think there are a few other people who hae missed ye, Merida."

Looking past her mother, Merida smiled as she saw her brothers rushing down the docks towards her. Following quickly behind the three boys was a heavy set, middle-aged woman dressed in a light brown dress with a matching wimple covering her head.

"Merida!" the three boys cried in unison as they dove towards her, hugging Merida and knocking her onto her behind as she wrapped her arms around all three of them while laughing.

"We missed ye sae much!" one of them cried.

"Ah missed ye too," Merida replied with a chuckle.

"We were worried we'd ne'er see ye again!" another exclaimed.

"Well, ye can see ye had nae reason tae worry," Merida answered.

"Ye look different," the third commented , looking her over "Ye're dressed up like a Vikin'!"

"Not quite," Merida replied with a smirk, "They haenae given me ane o' those horned helmets yet."

The triplets giggled as Merida let them go and stood back up before turning and smiling at the middle-aged woman.

"It's good tae see ye again, Princess," the woman said as she curtsied.

"It's wonderful tae see ye too, Maudie," Merida replied as she stepped forward and hugged the woman, who looked surprised at first before returning the hug as well.

"Whit's this?" a voice said, catching Merida's attention as she pulled away from Maudie, "Nae greetings fer yer auldest friends?"

Merida smiled as she saw Will walking towards her with Boyd and Andra flanking him. Merida laughed before running over and enveloping Will in a hug.

"It's sae good tae see ye all again!" Merida exclaimed as she pulled away and gave Boyd and Andra hugs as well.

"Look at ye!" Will said with a laugh, gesturing to Merida, "They've gone an' turned ye intae ane o' them."

"Ye say 'at like Ah was unwillin'," Merida replied, placing a hand on her hip.

"She ne'er was much o' a Highland lady," Boyd commented, looking up at Will, missing the glare Merida shot his way.

"Ah cannae believe ye came," Merida said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Whit, an' miss ye slayin' a dragon?" Will questioned, missing the quick waver in Merida's expression, "Nae on yer life!"

"Alright," Stoick declared, clapping his hands to bring everyone's attention to him, "Now that the family reunions are out of the way, how about we get ye all settled in? We don't have any royal apartments like you are all no doubt used to, but we do have some spare houses set aside for this sort of occasion."

"Ah believe 'at will dae nicely," Fergus replied, before putting a hand on Stoick's shoulder and leaning in close, "Is there somewhere were ma men an' Ah can talk tae ye an' yers in private?"

"Of course," Stoick said with a nod, before turning his attention to Hiccup, "Hiccup, I need you to bring the King's family to one of the empty houses."

"Alright," Hiccup nodded.

"Good," Stoick said with a nod as the three lords joined Fergus' side, before turning his attention to the surrounding men, "Gobber,

Spitelout, Bertha, come with us."

"Actually, Ah think Ah'll be o' better use helpin' Hiccup get everyane settled," Gobber replied as he nervously glanced at Merida and her mother.

Stoick regarded Gobber with confusion for a moment before nodding.

"I'll fill ye in later," Stoick replied before signaling for the others to follow him, Spitelout snorting and shaking his head as he spared Gobber a final glance before walking away with the others.

"Whit daes Da need tae talk with Stoick aboot?" Merida questioned as she and her friends rejoined her mother's side.

"Ah believe it has saemethin' tae dae with th' Vendal raids yer father an' his men hae been fightin' off fer th' last few months," Elinor surmised, "Probably wonderin' if they've been seen in th' area lately."

"Aye," Merida said biting her lip as she glanced at Hiccup, "They cud be anywhere."

"It's good tae see ye again, Hiccup," Elinor greeted as the young man approached her with Gobber in tow.

"It'sâ€¦it's good to see you again as well, Your Majesty," Hiccup replied with a bow.

"Oh, there's nae need fer 'at," Elinor said, waving off Hiccup's bow with a small smile on face, "Ye're practically family, after all."

The comment caused Hiccup and Merida to blush, which, in turn, caused Elinor to arch an eyebrow as her smirk grew.

"Hey," one of Merida's brothers said as he yanked on Hiccup's tunic, bringing the young man's attention downward where he found the triplets standing in front of him, glaring up at him.

"Um, hi?" Hiccup greeted in return, looking at the three boys in confusion.

"Ye've been treatin' our sister good, right?" the brother in the middle asked, pointing an accusatory finger up at Hiccup.

"Y-Yeah!" Hiccup answered, caught off guard by the question, "Of course I have."

"Good," the middle brother stated, pulling his finger back and crossing his arms, his brothers mirroring him.

"Because if ye daenae," the one of the right continued.

"Ye'll hae tae answer tae us!" the one of the left finished seriously, his brothers nodding in return. Hiccup looked at the triplets in confusion before turning his attention towards Merida and Elinor. Elinor was politely chuckling into her hand while Merida was

biting her lip, her face red from trying not to laugh out loud.

"Alright boys, 'at's enough," Elinor chastised her sons, "We hae tae be polite. We're guests after all."

The boys reluctantly returned to their mother's side, the one in the middle signaling he was watching Hiccup.

"Merida," Elinor said, turning her attention to her daughter while glancing at Gobber, "Why daenae ye introduce us tae th' man accompanyin' us?"

"Oh right," Merida said with a nod before walking over and indicating to Gobber, "This is Gobber th' Belch. He's th' master blacksmith here in th' village an' th' ane who taught us dragon fightin'. He's taught me a lot since Ah came here."

"It's a honor tae meet ye, Yer Majesty," Gobber answered nervously as he bowed to the queen, prompting the gathered Highlanders to look at the large man in confusion.

"Excuse me, Gobber, but may Ah ask ye a question?" Elinor inquired as she arched an eyebrow at the blacksmith.

"Certainly, Yer Majesty, o' course," Gobber answered with a nod.

"Ah was jist wonderin', but it sounds like ye hae a Highlander accent," Elinor observed, "Why is 'at?"

"Well, ye see," Gobber mumbled awkwardly as Hiccup and Merida glanced at each other nervously, "Ma mother was a Highlander."

"Oh," Elinor replied, pondering for a moment before her eyes widened as she managed to but the pieces together, "Oh, Ah believe Ah understand. Ah apologize if ma question bothered or offended ye in any way."

"Daenae worry, Yer Majesty," Gobber replied with a shrug, "It's saemethin' Ah made ma peace with a long time ago."

"Whit's he talkin' aboot, Maudie?" one of the triplets asked, looking up at his nanny with a questioning expression.

"Ye'll understand when ye're aulder," Maudie replied, looking at Gobber in concern as she reached down and patted the young boy on the head, "Dae ye know whit part o' th' Highlands yer mother was from?"

"Er, no," Gobber answered, "She didn't really like tae talk about where she was from."

"Well, if ye ask me, Ah think she was from Macintosh lands," Will spoke up, "Ye sound almost exactly like ma Da."

"Dae ye hae anythin' 'at she used tae own?" Elinor ventured.

"Ah dae," Gobber answered, reaching into his pocket and retrieving what looked like a golden medallion of some sort, "It's nae much, but she wore it all th' time."

Elinor reached out and took it as Gobber offered it to her.

"Ah'm afraid Ah daenae recognize any o' th' markings on this," Elinor stated as she examined the medallion, before handing it to Will, "Whit about ye, William?"

"Ah kind o' recognize it," Will replied, squinting his eyes at the medallion, "Ma Da wud know fer sure. Dae ye mind if Ah hold on tae it an' show it tae him? Promise Ah'll give it back."

"O' course," Gobber said after a moment of hesitation, "Thank ye sae much fer yer help."

"Think naething o' it," Will replied with a smile as he put the medallion into his pocket, "Anythin' fer a clansman."

Gobber smiled and nodded at the young lord.

"Now, we shud get ye all settled," Gobber said, motioning towards Hiccup, who nodded and began leading the group into the village. As they walked, Merida noticed the other teens standing nearby, watching them. Smiling, Merida waved them over, prompting the teens to make their way over hesitantly.

"Guys, Ah wanted ye tae meet some o' ma new friends," Merida said as the group stopped and looked at the approaching teens, "These are Fishlegs Ingerman, Astrid Hofferson, Ruffnut an' Tuffnut Thorston, an' Hiccup's cousin, Snotlout Jorgenson."

The group stepped forward and awkwardly bowed towards Merida's family.

"It's wonderful tae meet ye all," Elinor replied, nodding towards the teens.

"Some more than others," Will added with a charming smile, running his eyes over Astrid and Ruffnut.

"Oh gods," Astrid sighed in exasperation, rolling her eyes, while Fishlegs narrowed his at Will, "Not another one."

"Jist ignore him," Merida said, shaking her head at her friend.

"Why?" Ruff questioned, grinning as she looked Will over before glancing to her side and noticing Astrid and Merida giving her questioning looks, "What?"

"Come along, Merida," Elinor said, catching her daughter's attention and beckoning the young woman back over, "We hae tae gae get everyone settled. Ye can see yer friends later."

"Right," Merida replied with a nod, "Ah'll see ye guys later."

Merida's friends waved as she left them and rejoined her family.

"Cud ye nae?" Merida said, glaring at Will as they walked.

"Whit?" Will asked, shrugging his shoulders as he laughed, "It's nae ma fault ye hae such lovely lookin' friends."

"He ne'er changes, daes he, Andra?" Merida questioned, looking up at her larger friend, who nodded and muttered something in reply, causing Merida to giggle. As the others talked, Hiccup fell into step next to Boyd.

"Ah'm impressed," Boyd commented suddenly, causing Hiccup to jump in surprise a bit.

"Huh?" Hiccup muttered in confusion as he turned to look at Boyd.

"Oh, did Ah say 'at oot loud?" Boyd questioned, which earned a nod from Hiccup, "Sorry. Ah do 'at some times. Anyway, Ah was sayin' Ah was impressed with ye."

"Why's that?" Hiccup asked.

"When we left, she hated yer guts an' had tried tae kill ye," Boyd explained, prompting Hiccup to cringe and scratch the back of his head awkwardly, "But now she cannae keep her eyes off ye."

Hiccup looked over at Merida, just in time to catch her glancing at him, prompting her to turn away with a blush on her face. Hiccup smiled and turned back to Boyd.

"How'd you pick up on that?" Hiccup questioned.

"Ah'm rather observant," Boyd replied, staring ahead with a dazed look on his face, prompting Hiccup to look at the young lord with a raised eyebrow, "'At's how Ah can tell she really likes ye now. Guess 'at birthday party turned oot alright."

"Among other things," Hiccup agreed with a nod, "So what do you think of me?"

"Yer growin' on me," Boyd answered before glancing down at Hiccup's legs, "Sorry fer tryin' tae cut off yer leg, by the way."

"Don't worry about it," Hiccup up replied, a slightly nervous expression on his face, "I'm sure I would have done the same thing if I was in your position."

"Probably nae," Boyd stated simply without elaboration, prompting Hiccup to regard the young lord wearily.

"Anyway," Hiccup said, trying to change the subject, "What about the other two, what do you think they think of me?"

"Will's warmin' up tae ye tae," Boyd explained, nodding to the young man in questioned, "Liked whit ye were tryin' tae dae fer Merida. Daesnae really like the rest o' yer kind though."

"Certainly seemed to like Astrid and Ruff," Hiccup commented with a chuckle, "What about the big guy?"

"Andra?" Boyd replied, "Oh, Ah daenae think this is how he imagined

thin's turnin' oot."

"What does that mean?" Hiccup questioned, his brow furrowing.

"Whit daes whit mean?" Boyd inquired, turning to look at Hiccup in confusion.

"What you just said," Hiccup explained.

"Aboot whit?" Boyd asked, clearly lost.

"Aboutâ€|about Andra," Hiccup pressed, now confused as well.

"Oh, did Ah say 'at oot loud?" Boyd questioned, earning another nod from Hiccup, "I really hae tae stop daein' 'at."

Hiccup stopped for a moment as he watched Boyd walk away, a look of utter bafflement on the young Viking's face.

"I'm really starting to question if we were even having a conversation right then," Hiccup muttered before following along with the others again, Maudie and Gobber trailing behind the group.

"It must hae been difficult," Maudie commented, glancing over at Gobber.

"Excuse me?" Gobber asked in confusion as he turned to look at Maudie as they walked.

"Ah said it must hae been difficult," Maudie repeated, turning to fully look at Gobber, "Growin' up here with yer background. Ah cannae image th' people ye grew up with took kindly tae it."

"Naeâ€|Nae they didnae," Gobber replied with a shake of his head, "But it got better."

"Indeed," Maudie agreed with a nod, "Th' chief seems tae think highly o' ye."

"Stoick is a good friend," Gobber stated with a nod.

"Th' princess seems to think highly o' ye too," Maudie added.

"Whit makes ye think 'at?" Gobber questioned, arching an eyebrow at Maudie.

"Jist th' way she introduced ye," Maudie explained, "The princess tends tae wear her heart on her sleeve, makin' it rather easy tae tell how she feels aboot saemethin' or saemeane."

"Aye, Ah can agree with 'at," Gobber stated with a chuckle, "Ah daenae believe Ah caught yer name."

"Maudie," she replied.

"'At's a nice name," Gobber commented with a smirk, earning a smile from Maudie in return, "Ah take it ye know th' princess well?"

"Ah shud, Ah helped raise her after all," Maudie replied, "Ah'm th' royal caretaker o' th' children, their nanny if ye will."

"Ye take care o' th' children when their parents arenae available," Gobber surmised.

"Precisely," Maudie replied with a nod.

"Ye must hae yer hands full these days with these three," Gobber guessed as he indicated to the triplets who were scurrying around in front of the group.

"Th' princes can certainly be difficult at times, but they're good boys at heart," Maudie replied, "Still, while th' princess presented challenges o' her own, she at least didnae ootnumber me."

Gobber let out a snort of laughter in response as Maudie let out a small giggle.

"Ah take it 'at th' medallion was th' princesses' idea?" Maudie ventured.

"It was," Gobber answered with a nod, "She figured saemeane might be able tae make th' connection with it."

"Well, Ah certainly hope they dae," Maudie stated, "Everyane deserves tae know where they come from."

By then, the group had reached the small houses set up on the outskirts of the village.

"Well, here we are," Gobber commented as he coughed into his hand awkwardly, "Ah shud be gaein'. Other business Ah need tae take care o' an' all 'at."

"O' course," Maudie replied, nodding to Gobber, "Thank ye fer accompanyin' us, Gobber. Ah look forward tae seein' ye again."

"An' uh, Ah, ye," Gobber mumbled before he quickly began to hobble away, "Until then!"

"Until then," Maudie agreed with a nod, smiling as she watched Gobber leave. Turning around and ushered the triplets into one of the houses, not noticing as Merida and Hiccup watched her with curious looks on their faces before shooting each other questioning glances.

Later,

The Great Hall was filled with shouts and music as the Vikings and Highlanders feasted inside. The affair was slightly strained as the two peoples made a point of sitting with their own kind, but thus far the feast had been peaceful.

Upon the raised dais at the end of the Hall, an extra long table had been set up to allow the Highlander royal family, the three lords and their sons to sit with Stoick, his family and Gothi. Currently, Merida, sitting with Hiccup on one side and her father on the other, was engaged in the rapid telling of a story.

"Sae, th' Timberjack was comin' right at me, an' Ah had nae time tae move" Merida explained, her father looking at her in rapt attention

while her mother looked pale faced and worried, "Ah thought Ah was a goner, but Astrid comes oot o' naewhere, grabs me, picks me up an' throws me clear!"

"Whit!?" Fergus exclaims, turning and pointing where Astrid was sitting with her mother amongst the other Vikings, "'At little thin'!?"

"Ah know, right!?" Merida agreed, ecstatically, "'At's nae even th' crazy part! After Hiccup catches meâ€¦"

"It was less me catching and more her landing on me," Hiccup interjected with a smirk.

"Semantics," Merida replied with a wave of her hand before continuing, "Anyway, Ah stand up an' look back an' Ah see Astrid is literally holdin' the dragon's jaws open with her hands an' feet."

"Ye're jokin'!" Fergus exclaims with a laugh.

"Nae in th' least," Merida replied, "She eventually got oot of their with Fishlegs' help an' went ahead an' beat th' dragon all by herself."

"Sun above!" Fergus exclaimed with a laugh as he turned his attention towards Stoick, "Whit are ye feedin' them around here, Stoick!?"

"The Hofferson's have always been stronger than they look," Stoick replied with a smirk, "Astrid's father was the same way."

"So, tell me more about these little weapons Ah see ye carryin' around," Fergus said, indicating to the sword and bow Merida had set down next to her. Smiling, Merida picked them up and laid them on the table, pushing her plate away in the process.

"Merida, a lady daes naeâ€¦" Elinor began to say before looking around the room, noticing a number of Vikings with their weapons laying on the table before them around the Great Hall, "Ne'er mind."

"This is Sealgair," Merida explained, holding up her bow for her father to see. He took it in his large hands and looked it over, smiling at the engravings in the wood.

"Where did ye get this?" Fergus questioned, looking back at his daughter.

"Hiccup made it," Merida explained, glancing back at Hiccup and smiling at the young man as he blushed.

"Ye made this?" Fergus questioned, turning his attention towards Hiccup.

"Uh, yeah, I did," Hiccup replied, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment.

"Hiccup is th' apprentice blacksmith here in th' village," Merida explained, reaching out and patting Hiccup on the shoulder, "Probably

th' best weaponsmith ye'll ever meet."

"'At's high praise," Fergus pointed out with a chuckle.

"Ah'm th' ane who uses th' bow, arenae Ah?" Merida replied, crooking an eyebrow at her father.

"Speakin' o' which, whit happened tae yer auld bow?" Fergus questioned.

"There wasâ€|an accident," Merida muttered uncomfortably as she quickly glanced at Astrid, "Itâ€|snapped."

"Aw, 'at's a shame," Fergus said sadly, "Ah remember when Ah gave ye 'at bow fer yer birthday when ye were just a wee lass. Oh well, how about th' sword? Let's see 'at, shall we?"

Reaching down, Merida placed her sword on the table and pulled it from its scabbard before handing it to her father. Fergus took the blade in both hands, whistling as he looked it over.

"Now 'at's a fine blade," Fergus said as he looked over at Hiccup, "Did ye make this ane as well, lad?"

"Um noâ€|" Hiccup replied awkwardly, "Thatâ€|"

"'At sword belonged tae Hiccup's mother, Valhallarama," Merida finished, placing her hand on Hiccup's, "Stoick gave it tae me."

"Oh," Fergus said, realization dawning on his face as he gingerly handed the sword back to Merida, "Ah see."

"She called it Dragonsbane," Merida continued as she took the sword and slid it back into its scabbard before leaning it against the table.

"A fittin' name, nae doubt," Elinor commented, giving Hiccup an understanding look.

"Speakin' o' dragons," Fergus spoke up, a smile growing across his face, "Tell me more about this dragon trainin'."

"Well," Merida began a beaming smile on her face which fell away as it was replaced by a look of confusion, "Ma, Da, where are th' boys?"

Fergus and Elinor looked at their daughter in confusion, before looking around the table and seeing that the triplets were indeed gone.

"Oh, were cud they hae run off tae now?" Elinor questioned worriedly as she looked around before spotting Maudie in the crowd, "Maudie! Maudie, hae ye seen th' boys!?"

"No, Yer Majesty!" Maudie called back as she took a quick look around the crowd, "Ah'll keep an eye oot fer them!"

As Maudie disappeared into the crowd to look for the three princes, Elinor continued to watch the horde of people for any sign of her

sons.

"Oh boys, where are ye?" Elinor mumbled to herself.

At that moment, three small redheaded boys were scrambling in between legs and under tables on the Viking side of the Hall. Peeking out over the edge of the table, they caught sight of a plate of sweet rolls that had been set out on one of the long tables.

"Do ye think Viking sweet rolls taste as good as the anes from home?" one of the brothers questioned.

"There's ane way tae find oot," a second replied, the three smiling and nodding at one another before disappearing under the table again. As they reached where the sweet rolls were on the table, they peeked over the edge again. The plate sat in the middle of the table, out of reach of their short arms.

Glancing around, one of the boys spied a hatchet sitting on the table next to a Viking who was engrossed with talking to the man next to him. Reaching out, he grabbed the hatchet, his brothers helping keep the heavy weapon steady. The three boys then reached out with the hatchet and managed to hook the edge of the plate with the tip of the axehead. Slowly, they began to pull the plate towards them, their mouths watering as they watched the sweet rolls come closer and closer.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang that startled the boys as a large hand slammed down on the handle of the hatchet, knocking it from their hands and causing the plate of sweet rolls to hop up a few inches into the air. Quickly turning around, the boys found themselves face to face with Gobber the Belch.

"Well, well, well," Gobber mused with a smile, reaching out and grabbing all three of the boys by the scruff of their shirts with one hand and hoisting them up to eye level, "Whit dae we hae here?"

"We werenae daein' anythin' wrong!" one of the boys exclaimed, frightfully.

"Looks like ye were tryin' tae take ma axe," Gobber pointed out.

"Nae!" another brother exclaimed, "We were jist tryin' tae get th' sweet rolls!"

"Oh, were ye now?" Gobber questioned, raising an eyebrow at the three boys who quickly nodded in reply, "Well then, all ye had tae dae was ask."

Placing the triplets on the table in front of him, Gobber then reached over and grabbed the plate of sweet roll and slid it in front of the three boys who looked at the food in wonder.

"Ye're serious?" one of the boys asked.

"Ah can always put them back," Gobber replied as he slowly began to slide the plate away from the triplets.

"Nae!" all three shouted as they reached out towards the plate in

order to stop him.

"Ah thought as much," Gobber replied, smirking as he slid the plate back in front of the triplets, who began to eagerly dig into the sweet rolls.

"Thanks!" one of the boys exclaimed happily, "Whit was yer name again?"

"Gobber th' Belch," Gobber replied as he took a drink from the mug attached to his prosthetic hand.

"Why dae they call ye th' Belch?" another one of the boys questioned. As if to answer the question, Gobber put down his mug before belching loudly right into the boys' faces, the force blowing back their hair and almost knocking the three over.

"Whoa," one of the boys giggled, "Nice."

"Boys!" they heard Maudie exclaim, causing all four of them to turn to see her approaching them, "There ye are!"

"Hi Maudie," the three greeted nonchalantly.

"Ye three had yer parents worried sick, ye know?" Maudie admonished the triplets, placing her hands on her hips as she glared at them, "Whit hae ye been up tae?"

"Eatin' sweet rolls with Gobber," one of the boys replied through mouthfuls of sweets, nodding his head towards the Viking.

"Thank ye fer lookin' after them, Gobber," Maudie said, smiling at the blacksmith.

"Oh, think naethin' o' it," Gobber replied, smiling back at her, "They're nae sae hard tae handle ance ye know whit they're after."

"Yes, th' problem arises when they're always after it," Maudie stated with a chuckle.

"Hae a seat, Maudie," Gobber said, scooting over and indicating to the space next to him, "These three arenae gaein' anywhere any time soon."

"Very well," Maudie replied, smirking at Gobber as she slid into the seat, "If fer naethin' more than tae keep an eye on th' princes."

"Sae, whit happened tae yer hand?" one of the boys asked, indicating towards Gobber's missing hand.

"Well, 'at's a bit o' a long story," Gobber replied, smiling as he took another sip from his mug.

"We like stories," one of the boys replied.

"Except Da's stories," another spoke up.

"But 'at's because we've heard Da's stories way too many times," the

third boy added as he took another bite of sweet roll.

"Well, it all started when Ah was a young man and Ah heard th' story o' th' Boneknapper," Gobber began, causing the triplets to lean forward with excited looks on their face while Maudie smiled as she watched while the blacksmith held the princes in rapt attention.

Later,

Elinor sat in the small parlor to the house that the Vikings had provided to her and her family. She sat at a small wooden table, reading a few letters by candlelight, the sound of her husband's snoring coming from a nearby bedroom. After a few moments of reading a letter, her attention was brought to the door as a knock came from it. Raising an eyebrow, Elinor stood up and walked over to the door, opening it to reveal Merida and Hiccup on the other side.

"Evenin', Ma," Merida greeted nervously.

"Merida? Hiccup?" Elinor asked in confusion as she stepped outside, closing the door behind her, "Whit are ye two daein' here sae late?"

"Sorry," Merida replied, playing with a strand of her hair nervously, "Weâ€¦|We needed tae talk tae ye about something."

"Whit's 'at?" Elinor replied as she crossed her arms and gave Merida a questioning look.

"Well," Hiccup began, playing with his hands nervously, "Itâ€¦|It might work better for us to, uh, show you."

"Show me?" Elinor asked incredulously, "In th' middle o' th' night? Whit cud possibly be sae important?"

"Mother, we really cannae talk about it here," Merida pleaded.

"Merida, Ah am nae about tae gae gallivantin' off in th' middle o' th' night withoot a reason," Elinor replied crossly, "Ye will explain tae me whit is gaein' on this instant!"

Merida looked like she was about to hotly argue, but was stopped when Hiccup reached out and placed a hand on her arm, causing the redhead to stop and look at him. Hiccup shook his head, earning a nod from Merida.

"Your Majestyâ€¦|Elinor, what we want to talk with you about isn't something we can talk about in the open like this," Hiccup explained, "I know it seems strange, but we really need you to trust us. This is very important."

Elinor looked between the two teenagers before sighing and rolling her eyes.

"Very well," Elinor sighed before waving her hands at them, "Lead on."

Nodding to one another, Hiccup and Merida began to lead Elinor away,

heading away from the house towards the forest.

"We're gaein' intae th' forest?" Elinor questioned in confusion.

"Yes, Ma," Merida replied, glancing over her shoulder at her mother, "It's nae far."

"I certainly hope nae," Elinor grumbled, picking her way around a large rock as she followed the two into the forest. As the minutes passed and the two teens showed no signs of stopping, Elinor began to grow more and more agitated.

"Where are ye two leadin' me!?" Elinor questioned, crossing her arms over her chest as they approached the cliff side.

"Through here, Ma," Merida explained as she and Hiccup began to shimmy through the crevice.

"Through there!?" Elinor asked incredulously, watching as the two teen continued on leaving her behind, before throwing her hands into the air in frustration and following after them, "This is utterly ridiculous!"

After pushing her way through the crevice, Elinor looked over the cove from the small cliff she stood on. As she brushed herself off, Elinor noticed Hiccup and Merida making their way down to the ground.

"Merida! Hiccup!" Elinor called irately as she scrambled down after the two teenagers, glaring daggers at her daughter when she finally caught up with her, "Ah hae had quite enough of this. Ane o' ye will tell me whit's this is all about right now!"

As she shouted, there was suddenly the sound of movement behind her. Elinor's eyes went wide as she slowly turned around to look, watching frightfully as Toothless slowly emerged from the shadows, watching the queen with his cat-like eyes.

"Sun above," Elinor whispered, quickly turning around and backing away from Toothless, positioning herself between the dragon and the teens, "S-Stay behind me."

"It's okay, uh, Elinor," Hiccup replied, placing his hand on Elinor's arm to calm her before stepping in front of her, "This is what we wanted to show you."

"Ye wanted tae show me a dragon!?" Elinor exclaimed, before flinching backwards as Toothless snorted at her.

"Yes," Hiccup answered before motioning to Toothless, "Elinor, this is Toothless."

"Yeâ€¦Ye've named him?" Elinor asked in confusion.

"I have," Hiccup replied with a nod as he reached out and patted Toothless on his head, "He's really quite friendly."

"Friendly?" Elinor questioned incredulously, "Th' fire breathing dragon isâ€¦friendly?"

"Wud we hae brought ye here if he wasnae?" Merida questioned, which gave Elinor pause. Watching the queen carefully, Toothless approached her, sniffing the hem of her dress as he edge closer, causing Elinor to jump backwards frightfully. Unperturbed, Toothless moved closer to her until he was inches away from Elinor. Rising up, Toothless looked Elinor right in the eye before closing his and leaning towards her expectantly.

Elinor looked at Toothless in frightened confusion for a few moments before glancing at Hiccup and Merida for help. Both teens quickly made motions signifying that Toothless wished to be pat. Turning to look at Toothless, Elinor hesitantly reached her hand out, holding it stiff in front of her, a few inches away from the Night Fury. Toothless gave Elinor's hand a quick sniff before rubbing his head against it, causing the queen to gasp in shock. Slowly, she began to rub her hand across the dragon's scales, looking at Toothless in wonder as the dragon began to purr.

"Alright," Elinor said quietly, looking to Merida and Hiccup as she continued to pet Toothless' head, "Tell me everythin'."

A/N: This chapter ended up being a lot longer than I was originally expecting but there were a lot of story points I wanted to get through. Even then, I didn't get to them all and decided to move some until later. Hope you guys liked this chapter! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

31. The Truth

Chapter 31: The Truth

Elinor sighed, resting her head in her hand with her elbow propped on her knees as she sat on a rock, looking at Merida and Hiccup as they finished telling her what had been happening the last few months. Elinor put her hand over her mouth as the two finished, looking at them for a moment in quiet contemplation. After a moment, her eyes shifted to Toothless, who was currently lapping water from the nearby pond.

"All o' this is true?" Elinor questioned, still watching the dragon.

"Every word," Hiccup assured the queen, prompting her to turn back and give the teens a very serious look.

"Ye understand whit ye're telling me, correct?" Elinor questioned, "Nae anly are ye puttin' everythin' people hae ever known aboot dragons intae question, but ye're also sayin' 'at Mor'du an' th' Vandal are workin' tae release th' most powerful dragon 'at has ever been known who has been trapped fer generations by a witch's spell."

"Aye, we understand it's pretty big, Ma," Merida replied with a nod, "But it's all true."

Elinor fell silent again, covering her mouth with her hands as she pondered the ground in front of her for a few moments.

"Whit shud we dae?" Merida questioned nervously.

"'At's th' big question, isnae it?" Elinor replied with a chuckle and a sigh, "This is nae an easy problem tae solve. Ah cannae say how either o' yer fathers will react if Ah tell them, tae say naethin' o' if they'll even believe me."

"I don't think my dad's going to like this, no matter how we tell him," Hiccup stated, "I'll be lucky if he doesn't kill me when he finds out."

"Ah daenae believe 'at fer an instant," Elinor replied, giving Hiccup a meaningful look, "An' even if Ah did, we wudnae let anythin' like 'at happen tae ye."

Hiccup smiled at the queen as Merida reached out and placed a hand on Hiccup's knee.

"Ah'm nae worried aboot convincin' Stoick though," Merida spoke up, turning to look at her mother again, "If we can convince Da, then Ah think 'at'll be enough tae get Stoick on our side."

"Or it cud start a war," Elinor answered wearily, "We cannae rely on yer father bein' able ta convince Stoick nor shud ye rely on my ability tae convince yer father."

"Come on, Ma," Merida replied with a smirk, "We both know 'at ye've got Da wrapped around yer little finger."

"In some regards yes," Elinor replied with a small smirk of her own, "But yer father is still a king, an' even Ah cannae truly tell him whit tae dae. Especially if Mor'du is involved."

"Sae whit can we dae?" Merida questioned.

"Ah will try tae speak with yer father, Ah dae agree 'at Fergus will be easier tae convince than Stoick," Elinor explained, "He might believe me, but he's gaein' tae need some sort o' proof."

"We can do that," Hiccup replied, "Obviously, with all we know, we don't intend to go through with killing the Monstrous Nightmare."

"What dae ye plan tae dae then?" Elinor asked.

"I want to show everyone that dragons aren't as dangerous as we always thought," Hiccup explained, "I want to show that they can be tamed, that they can interact peacefully with people."

"A big display like 'at will definitely send a message," Elinor agreed, "We jist hae tae ensure it's th' message we want tae send."

"Hopefully, 'at's where ye an' Da will come in," Merida stated.

Elinor paused for a moment before nodding her head.

"Ah will dae what Ah can," Elinor stated, looking directly into Hiccup's eyes as she spoke, "But ye must tread lightly, Hiccup. A

wrong move here cud prove disastrous."

"I know," Hiccup replied solemnly with a nod, "Thank you for helping us. I don't think we could do this without you."

"Ah'm sure ye wud hae found a way," Elinor stated with a small smile, "Ye are an exceedinly clever young man."

Hiccup blushed under the praise, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment as Merida smiled at him.

"Now, if ye daenae mind, Ah'd like tae return tae th' village," Elinor stated as she yawned and stretched her arms above her heads, "All o' this gallivantin' aboot th' woods in th' middle o' th' night has left me exhausted. Ah think it's time fer us all tae retire fer th' night."

Merida and Hiccup agreed with nods before they patted Toothless on the head and bid the dragon goodnight before they began leading Elinor out of the cove. As they walked, Elinor fell into step next to her daughter as Hiccup walked ahead.

"Sae, much has happened since we left ye here," Elinor commented.

"Aye," Merida agreed with a smile and a nod, "It's pretty crazy when ye stop an' think aboot it."

"Whit Ah find interestin' is how much ye an' Hiccup's relationship has changed," Elinor stated, smiling wryly as she glanced at her daughter.

"W-Whit dae ye mean?" Merida questioned, a light blush on her face as she looked up at her mother.

"When we left ye, ye cud barely stand th' sight o' him," Elinor observed, "Now th' two o' ye are all but inseparable."

"Thin's changed," Merida replied, averting her eyes as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Changed in whit way?" Elinor questioned.

"Ahâ€|Ah got tae see th; real Hiccup," Merida explained hesitantly, glancing at the young man in question as he continued to lead them out of the forest, "An'â€|Ah really liked whit Ah found."

"Ah was hopin' saemethin' like this wud happen," Elinor stated as her smile grew, "Ah can tell th' two o' ye balance each other well."

"Ah think we dae," Merida agreed with a nod before looking up at her mother, "Ah guess Ah hae tae thank ye fer 'at."

"Och, nae need tae thank me, Merida," Elinor replied, "Ah didnae expect this tae turn oot as well as it did. Ah'm very happy fer th' two o' ye."

Merida smiled and the two began to walk through the forest in comfortable silence.

"Sae, hae ye kissed him yet?" Elinor asked abruptly, a smile on her face.

Merida sputtered in shock as her face turned bright red, whipping her head around to look at her mother.

"Maaaa!" Merida whined in embarrassment causing Elinor to chuckle in amusement.

_The next day, _

Merida walked up the sloping hills of the village towards a large building she wasn't familiar with. It was a grand, imposing building made out of hard stone and partially built into the cliff side. Flanking the front door were two large sculptures of muscular Viking men, one armed with a warhammer, the other only possessing one eye and a raven perched on his shoulder, a spear clutched in his hand.

Walking up to the large, wooden double doors decorated with the image of a warhammer, Merida pushed them open. Inside was a long hall made of stone, held up by rows of columns. Numerous torches lined the walls, illuminating various altars dedicated to numerous gods set up along the walls.

Merida looked around in confusion for a few moments, trying to find anybody in the large, apparently empty building. As she scanned the room, her eyes fell on a person sitting by an altar near the back of the room.

"Hello?" Merida called as she made her way over to the person, "Hic, is 'at you?"

As Merida approached, the person turned to face her, revealing she was not Hiccup but in fact a girl a few years younger than the princess. She had brown hair that was done in two braids that framed her freckled face. She wore a simple brown dress along with a black, hooded robe. As her brown eyes fell on Merida, she quickly blew out the match she had been using to light the candles on the altar.

"Och, Ah'm sorry," Merida apologized, "Ah thought ye were saemeane else."

"It's quite alright," the girl replied politely as she turned to face Merida, "Is there something that I can help you with, Princess Merida?"

"Oh," Merida said again as she blinked in surprise, "Ye know who Ah am?"

"Of course," the girl replied with a small giggle, "It's a small village and you're rather hard to miss."

"I suppose ye've got me there," Merida replied with a smirk, "But Ah daenae believe we've met afore."

"We haven't," the girl agreed with a shake of her head, "I suppose you haven't had much cause to come to the temple. I'm Helga."

"Helga?" Merida questioned, the name ringing a bell but she was unable to place it.

"Yes," Helga replied with a nod, "So, you're looking for Hiccup?"

"Ah am," Merida replied with a nod, "Hae ye seen him? Saemebody mentioned they saw him come in here earlier."

"I have," Helga replied with a nod, "I can take you to him, if you'd like?"

"'At'd be wonderful, thank ye," Merida answered with a smile. Smiling back, Helga reached out and grabbed a pair of crutches that Merida hadn't noticed before. Sliding them under her arms, Helga pushed herself up, causing Merida's eyes to widen in surprise as she saw the girl's legs dangling uselessly beneath her.

"Sun above," Merida whispered in horror as she moved to Helga's side, "Here, let me help ye!"

"It's alright, Princess," Helga replied, shaking her head with a half-hearted smile, "I'm quite capable on my own."

As if to prove her point, Helga began limping across the room, expertly balancing on her crutches. As she watched the younger girl, something clicked in Merida's head.

"Ye're her," Merida commented in understanding.

"What's that?" Helga asked in confusion as she came to a wobbly stop and look over her shoulder at Merida.

"Ye're her," Merida repeated, pointing at Helga, "Ye're th' girl who survived bein' pushed off th' cliff. Ye were there whenâ€¦"

"When Alvin the Treacherous killed Valhallarama," Helga finished with a nod, "Yes, that was me."

"Howâ€¦How did ye end up here?" Merida questioned.

"There are not many things a cripple like me can do," Helga explained with a sigh, "But minding the gods is one of them."

Merida fell silent, playing with her hair as she looked at the younger girl with a combination of awkwardness and pity.

"Would you like me to bring you to Hiccup now?" Helga questioned, a small smile returning to her features.

"Y-Yes, o' course," Merida agreed with a nod, "'At wud be lovely."

Motioning for Merida to follow her, Helga began limping along, leading the princess deeper into the temple.

"Hiccup ne'er struck me as th' religious type," Merida commented as they walked past other shrines depicting gods and goddesses in various forms.

"He's not," Helga replied, "He hardly ever comes in here, and when he does, he only ever visits one shrine."

"What ane is 'at?" Merida asked as Helga led her towards the very back of the temple.

"One no one else ever visits," Helga explained before they stopped in front of a door leading into a small room. Inside, Merida saw Hiccup sitting in front of a small shrine, much simpler than the other ones she had seen. On it sat a single red candle that had been lit, casting the room in a dim glow with long shadows. On the other side of the altar a picture depicting two dragons intertwined with one another. The helmet that Stoick had given Hiccup sat next to the young man along with his sword.

Hearing them approach, Hiccup turned around, a look of surprise on his face when he saw Merida.

"Mer!" Hiccup exclaimed in surprise as he hopped to his feet and awkwardly dusted himself off, "W-Whatâ€¦|what are you doing here?"

"Ah was lookin' fer ye," Merida explained, "It'sâ€¦|it's almost time."

"R-Right," Hiccup replied, scratching his head, "I was justâ€¦|justâ€¦|"

"Prayin'," Merida finished for him, smirking, "It's nae somethin' tae be ashamed o'."

"Depends on who you ask," Hiccup replied awkwardly, "And who you pray to."

"Who are ye prayin' tae anyway?" Merida questioned as she stepped forward to get a better look at the shrine, "Whit god is this shrine dedicated tae?"

"Loki," Helga spoke up, drawing Merida's attention back to her.

"Who is Loki?" Merida asked.

"The God of Fire and Thought," Helga explained as she looked back over at the altar, her eyes falling on the single red candle, "The Misty Eye of the Mountain Below, the Lie-Smith and the Father of Dragons."

"Father o' Dragons?" Merida questioned, glancing between Hiccup and Helga.

"Yeah, it means pretty much what you think," Hiccup stated, "So you can probably guess that he's not very popular around here."

"Then why are ye prayin' tae him?" Merida questioned.

"Becauseâ€¦|because I relate to him," Hiccup answered with an embarrassed shrug.

"Whit dae ye mean?" Merida asked.

"Well, I mean look at all the other gods in this temple," Hiccup elaborated, "Odin, Thor, Tyr. All of them big, burly warriors who stand for everything Viking culture is based on. But not Loki. He's smaller than the others, but he's smarter. He relies on his wits."

"Like ye," Merida observed with a small smile.

"Like me," Hiccup agreed with a nod, "The whole fire and intelligence thing makes him easy to relate to as a blacksmith too."

"Ah can see 'at," Merida replied with a nod.

"Anyway, I'm done here if you wanted to get going," Hiccup stated.

"We shud, th' final trail is soon," Merida agreed as she rubbed her arm nervously.

"Right," Hiccup said with a sigh, strapping his sword to his back before picking up his helmet and tucking it under his arm, "Let's get going."

"It was nice to meet ye, Helga," Merida stated as she turned and nodded her head to the younger girl.

"It was a pleasure meeting you as well, Princess," Helga replied with a nod of her own, before turning towards Hiccup, "Be safe, Hiccup. Try not to be a stranger."

"I'll do my best," Hiccup answered with a smile and a nod before he and Merida made their way towards the exit.

"Ye two seem close," Merida commented as they walked.

"Me and my dad were basically the closest thing Helga had to a family after what happened to hers," Hiccup explained, "Her mom had died about a year before and her father died fighting the dragon that destroyed their home. As for her sisterâ€¦"

Hiccup paused as they pushed open the doors of the temple and stepped outside.

"â€¦Well you already know what happened to her," Hiccup finished with a sad sigh prompting Merida to reach out and take Hiccup's hand in hers.

"Ane day, we'll gae oot an' find Alvin th' Treacherous an' make him pay fer whit he's done," Merida said, looking right into Hiccup's eyes as she said it, "Ye an' me, taegether."

"Thanks, Mer," Hiccup replied with a smile, giving Merida's hand a squeeze, "But first we need to get through today."

"Aye," Merida agreed with a sigh, "An' 'at wonae be an easy feat."

"No kidding," Hiccup stated as they made their way down to the arena,

"We just got to hope you were right about your mom."

"Ah daenae think 'at's whit we shud be worried about," Merida said with a concerned tone, "Are ye sure 'at we shud try an' tame th' Nightmare? It's nae th' nicest o' dragons an' 'at's sayin' saemethin'."

"It will make our point," Hiccup replied, "Besides, the dragon will already be there so we might as well take advantage of it."

"Alright," Merida stated with a nod, but a nervous expression still played across her features.

"Hey, don't you go getting nervous," Hiccup said, giving Merida's hand a reassuring squeeze, "I'm nervous enough as it is. You're supposed to be the brave one of this operation."

"Ah know," Merida replied, giving Hiccup a small smile, "There's jist a lot ridin' on whit happens taeday. Ah daenae want tae lose ye."

"You won't," Hiccup assured her, looking into her eyes as he spoke, "Now come on, we have to get to the arena before they start without us."

Making their way across the village, Hiccup and Merida made their way to the arena. As they neared the arena, they could see a large crowd making their way into the stands that surrounded the building. As they got closer, Merida and Hiccup saw Fishlegs moving through the crowd, accompanied by his parents.

"Fishlegs!" Merida called, catching his and his parents' attention.

"Hey," Fishlegs greeted with a smile and a wave as he stopped to greet his friends, his parents stopping with him, "You guys ready for today?"

"As we'll ever be," Hiccup replied with a nervous smile.

"All of you will be careful won't you?" Ribbon asked in a nervous tone, playing with her hand as she did.

"Oh, stop worrying Ribbon," Fishguts stated as he crossed his arms and rolled his eyes, "They're trained Viking warriors now."

Fishguts paused as she looked down at the three teenagers in front of him.

"They can handle it," he stated with a nod.

The three teens smiled at each other.

"Now come on," Fishguts said as he urged them onwards, "We don't want you three to be late."

Nodding, the three teens followed Fishguts and Ribbon to the arena. As they reached the large building, Ribbon quickly spun around and gave each of them a hug.

"You all be safe in there, alright?" Ribbon said as she stood back up, still nervously playing with her hands.

"We will, Mom," Fishlegs replied with a nod and a small smile, "Don't worry."

Ribbon nodded in return before turning and following Fishguts up into the stands. The three teens in turn headed for the gate that led into the arena itself. Approaching it, they saw Astrid, Snotlout, the twins and Gobber waiting for them.

"Hey," Astrid greeted them with a smile before her expression turned awkward as she looked at Fishlegs, who blushed in return when he saw her.

"Ye guys are still 'at awkward around each other?" Merida whispered to Fishlegs, raising an eyebrow at the young man.

"We-We haven't really got the chance to talk about it yet," Fishlegs explained as he nervously played with his hands, "I-I think she might be avoiding me."

"Give it time," Merida replied as she reached up and patted Fishlegs on the arm, "Ah'm sure she's jist as confused as ye are."

"Yeah," Fishlegs agreed with a shrug as he glanced over at Astrid, who was doing her best to look anywhere but at him, "I guess you're right."

"Right now, we have bigger things to worry about," Hiccup stated.

"I know," Fishlegs replied with a nod as he turned to look at Hiccup, "So what's the plan here?"

Hiccup turned to say something to Fishlegs but was interrupted when Gobber cleared his voice, bringing the teens' attention to him.

"Alright, ye lot, this is it," Gobber declared, "Th' moment ye've all been trainin' an' waitin' fer. Beyond 'at gate, ye'll all be facin' a Monstrous Nightmare, ane o' th' most dangerous dragons in th' world."

Gobber paused for a moment to let his words sink in.

"Ye'll need all yer trainin' an' skill tae beat this monster," Gobber said solemnly before a grin spread across his face, "But Ah hae nae doubt 'at ye will accomplish it. Ye all are, withoot a doubt, th' best group o' trainees to ever gae through this. Ah hae th' utmost faith in all o' ye."

The teens all smiled warmly at their teacher.

"Now, here is where Ah wud say gae make me proud," Gobber stated as he stepped aside and grabbed hold of the winch that would raise the portcullis blocking the way into the arena, "But I'm already proud enough as it is."

Gobber's gaze fell on Hiccup as he spoke, nodding towards the young

man.

"Sae instead Ah'll jist say good luck," Gobber finished before he pulled down on the winch, raising the portcullis and prompting the teens to make their way inside.

Stepping inside, the group was met with thunderous applause from the stands, which were packed to the brim. The teens looked around in wonder, unused to having the attention of so many people. Directly across from the entrance of the arena, up in the stands, Stoick sat in his seat with Fergus and Elinor once again sitting to his side with the triplets. On Stoick's other side sat Gothi, watching them expectantly.

"Alright," Astrid spoke up after taking a calming breath as she turned her attention towards Hiccup, "What's the plan?"

"Just follow my lead," Hiccup stated as he lifted his helmet up and placed it on his head.

"That's about as much of a plan we have going into these things anyway," Tuffnut commented with a chuckle and a shrug.

The crowd's cheering quieted as Stoick stood up and raised his hands, bringing attention to himself.

"Well, it seems like I can show my face in public again!" Stoick announced, earning laughter from the crowd, though he failed to notice the quick glare Elinor shot his way.

"If someone had told me a few short weeks ago that we would have a whole group of champions from our latest dragon trainin' class, I would never have believed them," Stoick stated with a chuckle, "If someone had told me that they were practically led by my own son, I would have tied them to the mast of a ship and sent it adrift for fear they had gone mad!"

The crowd cheered in response as Hiccup's face fell slightly. Merida gave Hiccup a sad look before she reached out and entwined her hand with his while Fishlegs reached out and patted him on the shoulder.

"But here we are, and no one is more surprised, or more proud, than me," Stoick continued, turning his attention towards Hiccup, a small smile spreading across his son's face as he heard the words, "And not just of my boy. For this time, we are not just graced with one champion but seven!"

The crowd cheered as Stoick gestured to the other teens.

"My nephew, Snotlout Jorgenson!" Stoick stated, pointing to Snotlout, who puffed his chest out proudly, "A chip off the old block that is his father."

"Ruffnut and Tuffnut Thorston!" Stoick continued, indicating to the twins, who smiled at each other, "We haven't seen a team like them since Stikes and Stoans Bergsson."

"Fishlegs Ingberman!" Stoick announced, prompting Fishlegs to scratch the back of his head as he blushed in embarrassment, "I've known him

since he was a boy and I can say that I am impressed with the man that he has become."

"Astrid Hofferson," Stoick continued as he pointed directly at Astrid, "Your father would be proud of you, girl."

Astrid smiled at that, sniffing and subtly rubbing her eye.

"And last, but certainly not least, Princess Merida O'Dunbroch," Stoick stated, smiling broadly at the girl, "When I first talked with her father about a marriage with my son, I was just lookin' to ensure the peace and safety of my people. I was lookin' for an ally against all our foes. I got all these things, but I got somethin' even greater. I got myself a daughter."

Sounds of agreement went through the crowd as Merida looked up at Stoick with a shocked look on her face.

"It was a rough start," Stoick said with a chuckle, echoed by those in the crowd, "But I'm proud to call you a Viking, Merida. I'm proud for call you a member of my family."

Merida bit her lip nervously as she turned to look at her mother in the stands, who was wringing her hands together with an equally nervous look on her face.

"Today, all of them become full members of our society," Stoick declared, "Today, all of them become one of us!"

The crowd roared in approval as Stoick turned and returned to his seat. Before he could sit, Fergus stood up and stepped in front of him.

"Those were some kind words ye said," Fergus observed with a smirk.

"Meant every one of them," Stoick replied with a smile of his own. Fergus laughed in reply before holding out his hand which Stoick grasped and firmly shake, letting out a laugh of his own. Together, the two of them sat down in their seats to watch what would happen.

"Give 'at overgrown lizard hell, Merida!" Will declared from the place in the stands where he, Andra and Boyd watched, "Show it who's boss!"

"Alright guys," Astrid said as she palmed her axe, looking nervously at the other, "You ready?"

Turning to look at his friends, Hiccup saw Fishlegs pull his hammer from off his back while Merida unslung her bow and nocked an arrow on the string. Turning, Hiccup looked back at Astrid and nodded while unsheathing his sword.

"I'm ready," Hiccup stated solemnly as he turned his attention to the gate from which the Monstrous Nightmare would emerge. Slowly, the weight holding the gate closed was lifted, unlocking the large, heavy doors. As soon as the weight was free, the gate exploded outward as the Monstrous Nightmare, its body already alight, came roaring out of its pen in a cloud of fire and smoke.

"Sun above," Elinor whispered in horror as she watched the Monstrous Nightmare scurry around the arena, "They hae tae kill 'at?"

"Nothing they can't handle," Stoick commented, though Elinor noted some nervousness in his voice.

The teens watched in fear as the Nightmare stampeded around the arena, the flames that covered its body going out as it ran. As they watched, the Nightmare crawled up onto the caged dome, where it hung from its claws and looked down at the teens. Snarling, the Nightmare dropped down and approached the group, who backed away hesitantly.

"All right, Hiccup," Snotlout spoke up, looking nervously as the Nightmare approached them, "Now would be a great time for a plan."

Hiccup quickly looked around at his friends, before up at the stands where everyone he knew was. Taking a deep breath, he looked back at the Nightmare, a look of determination on his face. Stepping forward, he lowered his sword before dropping it to the ground, the metal blade clattering against the stone floor.

"That's not really what I had in mind!" Snotlout declared with surprise as the crowd began to murmur in confusion.

"Whit's he daein'?" Fergus questioned in confusion as Elinor bit her nails nervously.

"I don't know," Stoick replied, his eyes narrowing as he leaned forward in his seat.

"Hiccup!" Gobber called from where he watched by the portcullis, "Whit are ye daein'!? Pick up yer sword!"

"Hey," Hiccup said to the Nightmare in a soothing voice as he cautiously approached it with his hands raised, "It's okay. It's okay."

The Nightmare continued to approach Hiccup, snarling as it glared at Hiccup. Taking a deep breath, Hiccup reached up and took off his helmet, holding it in his hands.

"I'm not like them," Hiccup declared as he dropped the helmet to the ground. Glancing back, he saw Merida watching him. Hiccup nodded to her, to which Merida replied with a nod of her own. She quickly tossed her bow and the arrow aside before unsling her quiver and sword and tossing them aside as well. Looking at the others, Hiccup watched as Astrid and Fishlegs followed suite, placing their weapons on the ground as Snotlout and the twins looked on in confusion.

"We're not like them," Hiccup stated, indicating to his three friends, who were cautiously approaching the Nightmare as well. The crowd gasped in shock at the events unfolding before them.

"Stop the fight," Stoick ordered as he began to rise from his chair.

"Nae!" Elinor shouted, quickly standing to her feet and holding her hands out to Stoick, who whipped his head around to look at her, "Let him dae this."

"What are you talkin' about?" Stoick questioned, his eyes narrowing as his voice began to rise, "What are they doin'!? What do you know of this!?"

Elinor said nothing, looking back towards the arena nervously, prompting Stoick to whirl back around and step towards the arena.

"Hiccup!" Stoick shouted down to his son, "What are you doin'!? Stop this!"

"No!" Hiccup yelled back, keeping his attention trained on the Nightmare in front of him, "I need you all to see this."

Slowly, Hiccup began reaching his hand out to touch the Nightmare, the dragon beginning to relax as he did.

"They're not the monsters we think they are," Hiccup stated, his entire attention focused on the Nightmare, "We don't have to kill them."

The crowd grew more and more unruly as they watched. Stoick's breath quickened as he began to panic. Spinning around, he grabbed a warhammer he had sitting next to his seat.

"Nae!" Elinor cried as she stepped in front of Stoick as he turned back to the arena, grabbing hold of his arm, "Stop!"

With an angry grunt, Stoick pushed Elinor off of him, sending her stumbling back and forcing Fergus to hop to his feet in order to catch her.

"I said stop the fight!" Stoick declared angrily as he slammed his hammer against the bars of the cage, bending it and creating a loud clang that echoed across the arena. As it did, the Nightmare's widened before it let out a bellowing roar.

"Hiccup!" Merida shouted in fear as the Nightmare snapped its jaws at Hiccup forcing him to backwards. As he dodged out of the way, Hiccup tripped over his own feet, sending him falling to the ground. A panicked look on her face, Merida reached down and scooped up her bow and nocked an arrow. Aiming at the Nightmare, she let the arrow fly, the missile striking the Nightmare between its scales. The dragon screamed in pain before turning towards Merida and sending a fireball flying at her, forcing her to dive out of the way as the fire exploded against the stone wall.

"Merida!" Elinor screamed in fear as Fergus helped her back to her feet before she quickly turned and glared at Stoick, "Look at whit ye've daene!"

"What I've done!?" Stoick roared as he turned his ire towards the queen and approached her threateningly "This is what is supposed to happen! What were they tryin' to do there!? What sort of nonsense did you put in my boy's head!?"

"Dae nae talk tae ma wife like 'at!" Fergus snapped as he stepped between Stoick and Elinor, glaring at the Viking chieftain.

"I will talk to whomever I like however I please until somebody tells me what the Hel is going on!" Stoick roared right back at Fergus before shoving the king out of his way, "Now move!"

Fergus watched Stoick run towards the arena entrance before turning his attention to Elinor.

"Elinor," he said, grabbing her shoulders and bringing her attention to him, "Whit's happenin'!? Whit are Merida an' Hiccup tryin' tae dae!?"

"Daenae worry aboot 'at now!" Elinor declared, turning and pointing at the arena, "Ye hae tae protect our daughter!"

Looking where she indicated, Fergus eyes widened in horror as he saw his daughter being chased by the Monstrous Nightmare. Without another word, Fergus turned and ran in the direction that Stoick had gone.

"Run, Merida!" Will shouted as Merida went racing past where he was in the stands, the Monstrous Nightmare hot on her heels. As she ran by the pens, Merida could hear Boudica and Meatlug fighting to get out of their pens to help. Looking around, Merida saw Fishlegs running over to her. Turning towards him, Merida ducked just as Fishlegs stepped forward and swung his hammer. The hammer whizzed over Merida's head and slammed against Nightmare's face, the force of the blow knocking the Nightmare to the ground. Fishlegs quickly backed away from the Nightmare as it tried to regain its footing.

"What do we do now!?" Snotlout questioned in a panic.

"Don't get eaten!" Astrid shouted as she ran over to Fishlegs and Merida, brandishing her axe once again. Merida and Fishlegs were watching the Nightmare wearily as they backed away. Suddenly, the Nightmare snapped back to its senses and roared at the two of them.

"Look out!" Astrid shouted as she grabbed the back of Merida and Fishlegs' shirts and pulled them out of the way as the Nightmare sent a blast of fire at them. The fire scorched the air in front of the teens as they tumbled to the ground before they scrambled to their feet to get away from the Nightmare.

"Over here!" Gobber shouted as he pulled open the portcullis, flanked by Stoick and Fergus, "Come on!"

The teens quickly raced over towards the exit, the Nightmare chasing after them. The three adults quickly pulled them in, trying to get them out of harm's way. Just as Hiccup reached the gate though, the Nightmare fired another flaming blast at him, cutting him off and scorching the wall right next to him. As Hiccup stumbled to a stop, the Nightmare raced around him, forcing the young man to double back as the dragon snapped its jaws at him. As Hiccup ran away, the Nightmare pounced on him, slamming its claws onto him and holding him against the floor of the arena.

"Hiccup!" Merida screamed, trying to move to help him, but her father grabbed hold of her and kept her at his side, despite her struggling. As Hiccup looked on in fear, the Nightmare lowered its head towards him, growling.

Elinor watched on from the stands, gripping the bars, her face pale and horrorstruck. Suddenly, a loud shrieking noise caught her attention, prompting Elinor to turn around to find the source of the noise. As she did, she saw the sleek, black form of Toothless bounding down through the village.

"Sun above," Elinor whispered before ducking as Toothless came leaping over her head, blasting a hole through the cage with a blast of plasma. Landing in the arena, Toothless quickly leapt into the air again and landed on the Nightmare's back, biting its shoulder and neck, causing the Nightmare to screech in pain.

"Night Fury," Gobber whispered with a mixture of horror and wonder.

Rolling over, the Nightmare knocked Toothless off its back, biting at the Night Fury as it tried to pin him to the ground. Toothless roared as he batted his claws at the Nightmare before kicking it off, causing the dragon to screech in pain as it rolled away. The two dragons snarled at one another as Toothless placed himself between the Nightmare and Hiccup. The Nightmare made a few more moves to get to Hiccup but Toothless deterred it with snaps of his jaw and swipes of his claws. Eventually, the Nightmare was cowed and it retreated to a corner of the arena.

"Alright Toothless, go!" Hiccup exclaimed as he ran up next to the Night Fury and tried to urge the dragon to flee, "You have to get out of here!"

Toothless refused to budge even as Viking warriors began to leap into the arena from the stands, quickly converging on the Night Fury.

"Go!" Hiccup shouted, but Toothless refused to budge, "GO!"

Grabbing a waraxe hanging on the wall, Stoick rushed towards Toothless, pushing the teens out of the way.

"Stoick, nae!" Merida shouted in a vain attempt to stop the village chieftain, breaking away from her father to chase after him.

"Dad no!" Hiccup shouted, holding up his hand to ward off Stoick, "He won't hurt you!"

Snarling as he saw Stoick, Toothless bound forward to meet the chieftain head on.

"No!" Hiccup cried in despair as the Vikings rushed towards Toothless, "You're only making it worse!"

Toothless barreled through a few Vikings, knocking them to the side before pouncing onto Stoick. The two tumbled for a moment before Toothless pinned Stoick onto his back, looking like he was about to bite the chieftain's head off.

"Toothless! No! Hiccup exclaimed, trying to prevent any kind of bloodshed, "Stop!"

Immediately, Toothless calmed stepping off of Stoick and turning to look at Hiccup with a sad moan.

"Get him!" Spitelout shouted before tackling Toothless, slamming the Night Fury's head against the ground as other Vikings began to dog pile onto the dragon.

"No!" Hiccup shouted, moving to help Toothless but was stopped as Merida stepped in front of him and wrapped her arms around him, holding him back, "Please! Don't hurt him!"

Merida buried her head in Hiccup's shoulder, tears running down her face as she held onto him, the young man still holding his hand out helplessly. Fishlegs sat on the ground with his head in his hands as Astrid leaned against him, her hands resting on his shoulders.

Stoick pushed himself to his feet, brushing himself off as he looked down at Toothless and the men who were holding him down. One Viking tried to hand Stoick the axe that he had dropped when Toothless knocked him down, but he pushed it away.

"Put it with the others," Stoick ordered with a growling voice, before turning his attention towards Hiccup and Merida. He marched over to where they were standing, before reaching down and pulling them aside.

"Move girl," Stoick snapped as he pushed Merida away while picking Hiccup up by his tunic, "I need to have a word with my son."

A/N: Sorry this took so long getting out, ended up being kind of hard to write. Third acts in full swing now though and we're careening towards the finale. Hope you guys like what's to come! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

32. No Son of Mine

****Chapter 32: No Son of Mine****

The Great Hall was dark and empty as the door swung open and Hiccup stumbled inside, his father stomping in after him.

"I should have known," Stoick grumbled to himself, "I should have seen the signs."

"Dad?" Hiccup questioned desperately as Stoick stormed past him.

"We had a deal!" Stoick snapped as he spun around to glare at Hiccup.

"I know we did!" Hiccup agreed, "But that was before!"

Hiccup groaned with anxiety as he brought his hands up to his head and grabbed fistfuls of his hair in frustration.

"Aw, it's all so messed up," Hiccup moaned.

"So everythin' in the ring, a trick!?" Stoick questioned accusatorially as he turned to Hiccup and pointed his finger at him, "A lie?"

"I screwed up," Hiccup tried to explain as Stoick waved his hand dismissively at his son and turned away, "I should have told you before now. I justâ€¦"

Hiccup paused as he tried to collect his thoughts.

"Take this out on me, be mad at me," Hiccup pleaded as he held his hand to his chest, "But please, don't hurt Toothless!"

"The dragon!?" Stoick snarled as he spun around and glared at Hiccup, "That's what you're worried about!? Not the people you almost killed!?"

"He was protecting me!" Hiccup argued, "He's not dangerous!"

"Not dangerous!?" Stoick roared in outrage, "They've killed hundreds of us!"

"And we've killed thousands of them!" Hiccup shouted back, "They defend themselves, that's all! They raid us because they have to! It's no different than what we did to the Highlanders!"

"Don't you dare compare us to those beasts!" Stoick shouted, infuriated.

"It's true though!" Hiccup argued, "They're just doing what they need to in order to survive! It's even worse for them! If they don't bring enough food back, they'll be eaten themselves! You won't believe it, Dad, but there's something on their island. The-"

"Their island?" Stoick questioned, cutting Hiccup off, "So, you've been to the Nest?"

"Did I say that?" Hiccup asked nervously.

"How did you find it?" Stoick pressed.

"What?" Hiccup asked in confusion, "No, I didn't find it. Toothless did. Only a dragon can find the island."

As Hiccup spoke, a look of sudden realization passed over Stoick's features, causing a sense of dread to fill his son's stomach.

"No, no, no, no Dad," Hiccup pleaded, "No, please, it's not what you think. You don't know what you're going up against."

"Oh?" Stoick questioned, "And what, exactly, am I going up against?"

"The Nest isn't just home to the dragons," Hiccup explained, "It's home to the Vandal as well."

"The Vandal?" Stoick asked, surprised for a moment before grinning, "I'm sure our Highlander friends will be eager to learn about this,

if it's true."

"That's not the only thing on the island, Dad," Hiccup said, desperately trying to get through to his father.

"What?" Stoick questioned with a contemptuous snort, "Are there ogres on the island as well?"

"No," Hiccup intoned seriously, "The Red Death."

Stoick paused and glared at Hiccup for a moment.

"You honestly expect me to believe that?" Stoick asked with a quiet fury.

"I'm telling you the truth!" Hiccup shouted in a pleading voice.

"Oh, now you're tellin' me the truth!" Stoick exclaimed, anger filling your voice, "You were happy to lie to me when you were off cavortin' with dragons in their Nest, but now when I finally have a way of getting there, it's suddenly too dangerous, full of Vandal and ruled over by the Red Death itself!?"

"Dad, please!" Hiccup continued to plead, "I promise you, you can't win this one!"

Stoick said nothing as he brushed past Hiccup and made his way towards the door.

"No, Dad!" Hiccup shouted, tears welling up in his eyes as he ran after Stoick and grabbed on to the larger man's arm, "For once in your life, would you please just listen to me!?"

With a grunt, Stoick shook Hiccup off, knocking his son to the floor. Hiccup breathed heavily as he looked up at Stoick, who glanced back at him.

"You've thrown your lot in with them," Stoick growled as he glared coldly down at Hiccup, "You're not a Viking."

Stoick shook his head as he turned his back on Hiccup.

"You're not my son," Stoick muttered as he marched away. As he reached the door, he yanked it open, causing Merida, who had been standing right behind the door, to stumble in. She quickly regained her footing, looking up at Stoick in surprise as the Viking chief glared down at her.

"You," he spat, "I should have known you'd be skulkin' around here. It was no doubt you who put these thoughts in his head."

"Ah didnae dae anythin'," Merida argued, her own ire rising.

"You did plenty," Stoick growled, before he reached down and ripped off the sword that was still strapped to Merida's back, ignoring her shouts of protest, "To think I gave you my own wife's sword. To think I called you daughter! The sooner I'm rid of you, the better!"

"Ah'm nae gaein' anywhere!" Merida shouted, glaring at Stoick.

"Oh, but you will, girl" Stoick snarled as he leaned in close, forcing Merida to take a step away "You will be leaving my island with the rest of your ilk, one way or another."

Merida looked like she was about to argue, but stopped as her father and mother appeared in the doorway.

"Stoick, whit is th' meanin' o' all this!?" Fergus demanded, the sight of the Viking chief leaning over his daughter instantly putting him on edge.

"I've been askin' myself the same thing, Fergus," Stoick replied as he straightened up and turned his attention towards the royal couple, "Why don't we ask your wife?"

"Ma wife?" Fergus questioned in confusion, "Whit daes Elinor hae tae dae with any o' this?"

"Because she knew what was happenin'," Stoick explained as he turned his eyes towards Elinor, the Highland queen meeting his gaze without flinching, "She tried to stop the fight when the boy was makin' peace with a dragon."

"It wud hae worked too, if ye hadnae interfered," Elinor stated plainly.

"Wait," Fergus said in surprise as he looked at his wife, "Elinor, ye knew about all this?"

"Ah did," Elinor replied, not taking her eyes off of Stoick, "Hiccup an' Merida came tae me last night with their plan."

"I knew it!" Stoick snapped as he pointed an accusatory finger at Elinor, "I knew you were in on this!"

"Elinor, why on Earth did ye gae along with this!?" Fergus questioned, his confusion apparent, "Dragons are ferocious, blood-thirsty beasts! There was nae way th' boy cud calm it like he was tryin' tae!"

"Except he already has, Fergus!" Elinor shouted, whirling around to face her husband, causing him to take a step back in surprise, "Ah've seen it with ma own eyes! He's trained 'at Night Fury saemehow! Befriended it even!"

Elinor leaned towards her husband and grabbed onto his clothes, looking up at him pleadingly.

"Fergus, Ah touched it with ma own hand," Elinor said, desperately trying to convince her husband.

"That monster tried to bite off my head!" Stoick argued, his voice booming off the stone walls.

"Only he didnae!" Elinor yelled as she rounded on Stoick again, "Hiccup called him off!"

"That dragon listened to no one," Stoick growled as he took a step towards Elinor, "Most certainly not that boy!"

"'At boy is yer son!" Elinor shouted as she got right in Stoick's face.

"No true Viking throws his lot in with the enemy," Stoick snarled, "I have no son."

As soon as the words left Stoick's mouth, the sound of a loud smack cracked through the air, seeming to echo the same sound made a few months earlier. Elinor glared up at Stoick as the Viking chief stood with his head slightly turned, a red mark forming on his cheek as the Highland queen stood with her hand still raised, a look of utter fury chiseled into her features.

"How dare ye!" Elinor seethed as the others present looked on in shock, "How dare ye say such a monstrous thin' in yer son's presence!"

"I only speak the truth, Your Highness," Stoick spat as he turned his head back to you, "I'll give you that one for free, but be warned, where I come from if woman strikes a man, she best expect to get struck back."

"'At's quite enough o' 'at," Fergus spoke up with a warning tone.

"And I've had quite enough of you," Stoick growled, "The sooner all of you, your daughter included, are off my island, the better."

"Very well then," Elinor said, straightening up as she regained some of her royal composure, "Ah think it's time tae take our leave, Fergus. Merida?"

"Uh, yes, Ma?" Merida asked in confusion, snapped out of her shock by her mother speaking to her.

"Collect Hiccup an' bring him tae th' ship," Elinor stated, "It's come time fer us tae leave."

"Y-Yes, Ma," Merida said, a mixture of confusion and excitement in her voice as she rushed over to Hiccup's side and helped him to his feet.

"Ye want tae take th' lad?" Fergus questioned as Stoick continued to glare at Elinor.

"O' course," Elinor replied, her gaze never wavering from Stoick's, "He's a remarkable young man, an' if his own people are sae willin' tae toss him aside, th' Highlands can anly benefit by makin' him ane o' our own. Plus, Ah wudnae dream o' separatin' him an' Merida."

With that, Elinor turned and began making her way to the door, Merida and Hiccup by her side.

"Come along, Fergus," Elinor said, glancing back as she reached the door way, "Ah grow tired o' this barbarous place."

Fergus moved to follow Elinor, but was stopped as Stoick stepped

forward and put his hand on the king's shoulder.

"Don't go runnin' off just yet, Fergus," Stoick said grimly, "We still have business, you and I. We're still allies, are we not?"

"Ah'm startin' tae lean decidedly taewards nae," Elinor stated, turning around and glaring at Stoick.

"This whole alliance was your idea in the first place, if I remember correctly," Stoick retorted.

"An' ye've done a wonderful job makin' me regret 'at decision," Elinor spat.

"Regret it or not, you and I are still allies," Stoick said, turning his attention back to Fergus.

"Whit dae ye want then?" Fergus questioned, "An' Ah warn ye, Ah am nae in a very givin' mood."

"The boy has given me the information I needed to find the dragons' Nest," Stoick explained, "Bring your men with mine and we can put an end to these dragons once and for all."

"Fergus!" Elinor said, a worried tone in her voice as she spoke up, "Daenae!"

"Does your wife speak for you now, Bear King?" Stoick questioned, trying to goad Fergus.

"Nae, she daesnae," Fergus retorted, "But 'at daesnae mean Ah'm gaein' tae throw away th' lives o' ma men fer yer vendetta."

"What about your own?" Stoick questioned.

"Whit are ye on about now?" Fergus demanded, clearly growing more annoyed.

"If what the boy claims is true, the Vendal live on the Nest with the dragons," Stoick explained. Fergus said nothing in return, staring at Stoick in thoughtful silence.

"If this is true, is there anything you or your men wouldn't give to put the Demon Bear and his ilk down for good?" Stoick pressed.

"And if he isnae there?" Fergus questioned carefully.

"Then I will be grateful for your assistance and with my enemies eliminated, it opens my people up to eliminate yours," Stoick answered.

Fergus said nothing for a while, clearly going over his options in his head.

"Fergus, ye cannae seriously-" Elinor began to say but was cut off as Fergus raised his hand, silencing her.

"It is long past due fer saemeane tae brin' Mor'du tae heel," Fergus said simply, "An' Ah cannae pretend 'at Berk is th' anly place beset

by dragon attacks. Fer too long Ah hae heard reports o' villages picked clean an' burnt tae th' ground. Nae longer."

He turned to look at Stoick sternly.

"Let us put an end to this," Fergus said, earning a grim nod from Stoick.

"Da!" Merida called, stepping forward, "Da, ye canae! If ye believe th' part about th' Vendal, then ye hae tae know whot else is dwellin' on 'at island!"

"What is she talkin' aboot?" Fergus questioned, turning his gaze towards Stoick.

"The boy claims that the Red Death lives on the island as well," Stoick explained with a scoff, "That it controls the other dragons. The Red Death has not been seen for generations and is no doubt dead and buried in some deep place in the earth. The idea that a dragon could live that long is preposterous."

"It's true, Da!" Merida exclaimed, panic rising in her voice, "Ah've seen it with ma own eyes!"

"Listen tae me, sweetling," Fergus whispered as he walked over to Merida and kneeled down in front of her, placing his large hands on her shoulders, "Ah know whit ye're tryin' tae dae. Perhaps there is more truth tae whit ye an' Hiccup say aboot dragons than Fergus wud want tae believe but th' fact remains 'at a whole nest o' them is a threat. An' if whit ye say aboot th' Vendal is trueâ€¦Ah hae tae dae this."

"Da, nae, please!" Merida begged, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Ye stay here an' keep yer mother safe," Fergus said as he stood up, "When Ah come back, we'll all gae home. Hiccup too, jist like yer mother suggested. If we're lucky, Ah'll hae a giant dragon skull tae put in ma trophy room."

"Da," Merida moaned, tears rushing down her face, "Nae."

"Be good," Fergus said gently, before turning and making his way towards the door.

"Fergus," Elinor said helplessly, trying to think of a way to stop her husband.

"Ah know whit ye're gaein' tae say," Fergus replied, reaching out and cupping Elinor's cheek with his hand, "Daenae worry. Ah'll be back before ye know it."

With that, he turned and followed Stoick out the door, the others watching helplessly as the two made their way down to the docks and whatever fate waited for them across the sea.

_Later, _

The docks were abuzz with activity as Vikings and Highlanders prepared their longships for war. Vikings pushed rams and catapults onto their ships as others loaded up weapons and ammo for their siege

engines. On one of the ships, a group of Vikings were securing Toothless. The Night Fury was held in place by chains and two Viking men managed to strap a yoke around the dragon's neck. Toothless snarled and fought against the chains, but no matter what he did, he could not escape.

"Set sail!" Stoick shouted as he stepped onto the ship Toothless was held on, prompting the other ships to unmoor and begin heading for open water, "We head to Helheim's Gate!"

As he looked around, Stoick saw Hiccup standing up on the cliffs looking over the docks, Merida standing at his side. Stoick turned away and shook his head before walking towards the front of the ship, where Toothless was secured.

"Lead us home, devil," Stoick snarled as Toothless glared up at him.

As the Viking ships set sail, the Highlander ones began to unmoor as well. Fergus stood at the front of the lead ship, his arms crossed as he stared out at the sea.

"Dae ye really think th' Vendal will be there, Yer Highness?" Cameron Dingwall questioned as his ship floated next to Fergus'.

"Ah daenae know," Fergus replied while shaking his head, "But our people will benefit from this all th' same."

Cameron only nodded in reply.

"Keep yer men ready, Lord Dingwall," Fergus stated as he turned and walked away from the front of ship, "Whatever we find on 'at island, we're gaein' tae hae a fight on our hands when we get there."

As the ships set sail, Hiccup and Merida watched from the cliffs, observing each of the ships disappearing over the horizon. As the ships vanished, the two continued to watch after they were long gone, not noticing as Astrid and Fishlegs walked up behind them. Astrid and Fishlegs shared a look before walking up to Hiccup and Merida, flanking the two.

"It's a mess," Astrid spoke up with a sigh and some awkward laughter, "You must feel horrible, Hiccup. You've lost everything. Your father, your tribe, your dragon."

"Thank you for summing that up, Astrid," Hiccup deadpanned. At the same time, Merida turned and glared at Astrid.

"Whit's yer problem!?" Merida snapped.

"Nothing!" Astrid replied, holding her hands up to try and calm Merida down, "I'm sorry."

"She's just trying to help," Fishlegs defended her.

"I've never been very good at it," Astrid stated, averting her eyes as she played with her hands nervously.

"'At's an understatement," Merida stated with a snort as she looked back out at the sea.

"Why couldn't I have just killed that dragon when we found him in the woods?" Hiccup whispered to himself, "It would have been better for everyone."

"Yep," Astrid agreed as she looked at Hiccup "The rest of us would have done it. I was the only one of us who wasn't there, so I have to ask, why didn't you, Hiccup?"

Hiccup said nothing, lost in thought.

"Why didn't you?" Astrid repeated.

"I don't know," Hiccup admitted, "I couldn't."

"That's not an answer," Astrid pointed out.

"Why is this sae important tae ye all o' a sudden?" Merida questioned in confusion.

"Because I want to remember what he says, what both of you say, right now," Astrid explained, an intense look on her face. A thoughtful look passed over Merida's face as she realized what Astrid was doing.

"Hiccup," Merida said, drawing Hiccup's attention to her by reaching out and touching Hiccup's arm, "Why didnae ye kill Toothless?"

"Of for the love ofâ€¦I was a coward!" Hiccup shouted, whirling on Merida, "I was weak! I wouldn't kill a dragon!"

"Ye said wudnae 'at time," Merida observed.

"Couldn't, wouldn't, whatever!" Hiccup exclaimed, throwing his free hand into the air in exasperation, "Six generations and I'm the first Viking who wouldn't kill a dragon!"

The others fell silent as Hiccup out took a few breathes as his head fell and he looked sadly at his feet. Reaching out, Merida cupped Hiccup's chin and brought it up so his green eyes looked into her blue ones.

"First tae ride ane though," Merida observed with a gentle smile. A look of realization passed over Hiccup's face as the words bounced around in his head.

"I'm still waiting on that answer you know," Astrid spoke up, a small smile on his face.

"I wouldn't kill him because he looked as frightened as I was," Hiccup said with a sigh as he turned his attention back to Astrid, "I looked at him, and I saw myself."

"I bet he's really frightened now," Fishlegs observed, smiling down at his best friend, "What are you going to do about it?"

"Eh," Hiccup said with a shrug, smiling back at Fishlegs as he took Merida's hand and gave it a squeeze, "Probably something stupid."

"I feel like we've already done that," Astrid observed with a

smirk.

"Then I think it's time for something crazy," Hiccup stated as he began to walk away from the cliffside, a look of excitement on his face, "Gather everyone together and-"

Hiccup was cut off as a long, mournful horn blast echoed from the direction of the ocean. His face fell as everyone froze, looks of shock and horror on their face. Looking in the direction that the sound had come from, Hiccup's face paled as he saw a cloud of fog rapidly approaching the island, the shadows of longship cutting through the waters just visible through the obscuring mist.

"Naeâ€|" Merida whispered, shaking her head as her eyes widened in horror, "It cannae beâ€|"

As Merida spoke, another horn blast cut through the air, shaking the four teens to the core.

"Vendal," Hiccup gasped.

A few minutes later, the Vendal longships came crashing into the docks, allowing the barbarians to come pouring out onto the shore. Mor'du stepped off of his ship, the boat rocking due to his massive weight. Looking around, Mor'du grinned before taking a deep sniff of the air.

"Found you," Mor'du growled with a savage grin, before turning and pointing at a group of Vendal, "You lot with me! The rest of youâ€|"

Mor'du laughed as he looked at Berk, watching as the villagers began to panic and flee.

"Kill everyone and burn the village to the ground."

A/N: This was an intense chapter to write. I hope you guys enjoyed it. Big things to come! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

33. Bloodlines

****Chapter 33: Bloodlines****

Hiccup, Merida, Fishlegs and Astrid rushed through the village as fast as their legs could carry them. Even as they made their way to the center of the village, they could hear the sounds of the Vendal making their way up from the docks.

"What do we do!?" Fishlegs exclaimed, a panicked look on his face.

"Ah hae tae find ma mum, ma brothers!" Merida stated, looking equally frightened, "Ah hae tae gae!"

With that, Merida turned and ran towards another part of the village, not even waiting to see if any of the others would follow her.

"Merida, wait!" Hiccup cried helplessly as he reached out to stop her.

"It's okay!" Astrid said as she ran after Merida, "I'll keep her safe!"

"What do we do?" Fishlegs questioned fearfully. Hiccup thought for a moment before grabbing Fishlegs by the arms.

"I need you to get down to the arena," Hiccup said, looking Fishlegs right in the eye as he spoke.

"The arena?" Fishlegs questioned in confusion, "Why?"

"Because I need you to release Boudica and Meatlug," Hiccup explained, "Things will be a lot easier with two dragons on our side."

"Right," Fishlegs agreed with a nod of understanding, "I forgot my hammer down there too in all the confusion. What about you?"

"I'm heading towards the smithy," Hiccup elaborated, "There are a few things that I need to pick up."

"Right," Fishlegs stated with another nod as he turned to go, "Good luck."

"Thanks," Hiccup said as he began to jog towards the smithy, "We're going to need it."

Hiccup ran through the village, ducking down alleys and dodging around buildings as he made his way towards the smithy. As he turned a corner, he quickly scrambled back behind it as a pack of Vandal went running past. Hiccup waited for a few seconds before peeking around the corner again. He saw the smithy not far away, smoke rising from the chimney.

"Gobber must have been doing some repairs before leaving with the others," Hiccup muttered to himself before moving around the corner and sneaking towards the smithy. Hiccup was on alert for any sign of Vandal warriors and sighed in relief when he didn't see any. Quickly, he reached for the door knob, only to have it pulled away as the door was opened from the inside, revealing a Vandal in the process of stepping out of the building. Both Hiccup and the Vandal froze, staring at each other for a moment as a feeling of dread welled up in Hiccup's chest.

"Crap," whispered to himself before the Vandal roared at him, his voice seemingly echoing through the whole village. Before Hiccup could react, the Vandal reached out and grabbed him by the throat. Hiccup kicked his legs helplessly as the Vandal lifted him off of his feet, the young man gasping as he tried to get some air into his lungs. Hiccup's eyes widened as he saw the Vandal lift its club to bash his head in. Panicking, Hiccup lashed out with a kick, his boot connecting with the Vandal's groin. The Vandal let out a wheezing groan of pain as he released Hiccup and collapsed to the ground. Hiccup quickly picked himself up as he grabbed the Vandal's discarded club before bashing the Vandal over the head with it, causing the barbarian to collapse to the ground where he lay motionless. Hiccup took a few calming breathes as he tossed the club aside. As he did,

he heard a roar of fury, bringing his attention to the six Vandal standing a short distance away.

"Oh, come on!" Hiccup groaned as the Vandal began sprinting at him. Turning, Hiccup ran into the smithy, grabbing hold of the door just as one of the Vandal reached him. Slamming the door closed, Hiccup managed to slam it close on the Vandal's arm, the Vandal shrieking as its arm cracked and it was forced to drop its club. Pulling the door open, Hiccup slammed the door again, slamming it into the injured Vandal's face, knocking him to the ground with a broken nose.

Turning away, Hiccup ran into the smithy as another Vandal ran up and kicked the door open. As they ran in, they found the furnace still burning, a half made sword still sitting on the anvil. Looking around, the Vandal looked for Hiccup, who had seemingly disappeared. Eventually, one noticed something moving in a dark corner of the room. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw Hiccup standing next to some sort of contraption. Before he could say anything, Hiccup pulled on a lever, causing the contraption to spring open, revealing the ballista. The Vandal's eyes widened in surprise just as the ballista launched a bola right at him, the munition wrapping around the Vandal and knocking him into the air, sending him flying out the large window, the shutters swinging closed as he fell outside.

The noise immediately caught the attention of the other Vandal who roared as they charged him. With a yelp of surprise, Hiccup scrambled out of the way, ducking below the swing of one of the Vandal's clubs. As he stumbled over to the anvil, Hiccup desperately grabbed the unfinished sword and the smith's hammer sitting next to it. A Vandal roared as he hopped over the anvil, his club raised to attack. Before he could attack, Hiccup swung the hammer and hit the Vandal on the knee, the iron tool connecting with the Vandal's knee with a crack. The Vandal screamed in pain, dropping his club as he fell to his good knee. Before the Vandal could recover, Hiccup stabbed forward with the sword, the blade pushing into the barbarian's chest. The Vandal let out a gurgle of pain and surprise, his eyes wide, before he collapsed to the ground.

Hiccup moved to pull the sword out but before he could, another Vandal ran up and smacked Hiccup with his club, dazing Hiccup and sending the young man stumbling backwards.

Hiccup managed to catch himself on Gobber's workbench, the heat from the furnace almost searing him. Grabbing his head and giving it a shake, Hiccup managed to regain his bearings. As he did, Hiccup found the Vandal charging at him again, club raised to strike. Swinging his hammer, Hiccup managed to hit the Vandal on the side. The force of the blow caused the Vandal to stumble to the side and slam right against the burning furnace. The Vandal screamed in pain as his hands and the side of his face were burnt. As the Vandal writhed in pain, Hiccup swung his hammer again, hitting the Vandal on the side of the head and knocking him to the ground, blood pouring out of the wound as he lay on the smithy floor.

As another Vandal charged at him, Hiccup turned and hurled the hammer at him. The hammer struck the Vandal right in the face, connecting with a crack and knocking the Vandal to the ground. Before he could do anything else, the last Vandal ran up and grabbed Hiccup by his vest. Lifting Hiccup off his feet, the Vandal roared at him before

hurling him across the smithy, causing Hiccup to slam into his workbench. Hiccup groaned as he collapsed to the ground, before grunting as something fell onto his lap. Shaking his head clear, Hiccup looked down to find the crossbow in his lap, a bolt still loaded in it. Hearing another roar, Hiccup looked up and found the Vandal charging at him again. Grabbing the crossbow, Hiccup pointed it at the Vandal and pulled the trigger. The bolt sprung out of the crossbow, hitting the Vandal in the chest, knocking the barbarian off his feet and onto the ground.

"And Dad said I shouldn't leave this thing loaded," Hiccup commented with a chuckle. Hiccup tried to pick himself up, but as he did, a Vandal suddenly appeared over him before the barbarian kicked him, knocking the young man to the floor and sending the crossbow sliding across the ground. Groaning, Hiccup looked up at the Vandal as it stood over him, blood pouring from the barbarian's broken nose as he raised his club to strike the young man. Before he could, the Vandal let out a yelp of pain as something cracked him over the head from behind. The club fell limply from the Vandal's hand before the barbarian fell to the ground, revealing Snotlout standing behind him.

"Snotlout?" Hiccup asked in confusion.

"Hey, cuz," Snotlout greeted with a smirk as he shouldered his mace and offered Hiccup his hand, "Was just passing by and it seemed like you had this under control but I figured I'd lend you a hand."

"What are you doing here?" Hiccup questioned as he took Snotlout's hand and let his cousin pull him to his feet.

"I was heading to the Great Hall, figured that's where everyone else would be going with all this happening," Snotlout explained, "I heard fighting from inside and decided to come check it out. It's your lucky day, I guess."

"Not sure I would agree," Hiccup replied with a sigh, "Have you seen Ruff and Tuff?"

"Yeah, they're waiting outside," Snotlout explained, "Where's your girl?"

"She went to go find her mother and brothers," Hiccup answered as he picked up his crossbow.

"Well, I guess we should do the same. Don't want her getting in over her head, do we?" Snotlout commented with a chuckle before giving Hiccup a questioning look, "Why'd you come here then?"

"Needed to pick some things up," Hiccup replied, as he strapped his crossbow to his belt before tucking a few more arrows in his belt as well. He then walked over to Gobber's work bench, finding Bemuhén laying on top.

"I figured Gobber brought this here," Hiccup commented as he took the sword and strapped it to his back.

"So, can I ask you a quick question?" Snotlout asked, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"Uh, sure, what is it?" Hiccup questioned in return.

"What was that with in the arena?" Snotlout asked, "The stuff with the dragons."

"I don't think this is the right time, Snotlout," Hiccup sighed.

"I know, I get that," Snotlout replied, trying to sound understand, "It's just me and the twins were talking after it and-"

"Look, I'll explain everything to you guys after this is all done," Hiccup stated, looking at Snotlout impatiently, "Okay?"

"Yeah, sure" Snotlout replied quickly, trying to placate Hiccup, "You ready to go?"

Hiccup nodded in reply and the two stepped outside, where they found Ruffnut and Tuffnut waiting, weapons at the ready as they looked around cautiously.

"So, where do we go now?" Ruff questioned.

"We have to find Merida," Hiccup instructed.

"Any idea where she'd be?" Tuff asked in reply.

"She went to go find her family," Hiccup answered, "The last time that happened, the queen took shelter with me in the Great Hall."

"Sounds like a good place to check," Ruff observed with a nod.

"Agreed," Hiccup stated as he began to lead the way through the fog, "Follow me."

Meanwhile,

In the Great Hall, a number of people had taken shelter. Together they had managed to push one of the large tables in front of the doors, hoping it would barricade it against any intruders. The villagers were now huddled near the back of the hall, Elinor among them along with her sons and Maudie.

"Are they gaein' tae get us, Ma?" one of the boys asked as he clutched Elinor's skirt.

"Nae, little ane," Elinor whispered nervously, reaching down and running her hand through her son's hair, "We're safe in here."

As she spoke, a loud bang came from the door, causing the group to gasp in fear as the sounds of angry voices floated in from outside. Elinor looked around as the crowd, which was made up of children, homewives and the elderly. The only warriors among them were Will, Boyd and Andra, Stoick having emptied the village in his bid to destroy the Nest. The village was at its weakest and Elinor had no doubt that was exactly why the Vendal were here. Mor'du was cunning as he was cruel and it would seem her husband and Stoick the Vast had played right into the Demon Bear's hand.

Another bang came from the door, causing the wooden barrier to shake. Some of the children began to wail in fear.

"Is there any other way oot?" Will questioned as he stepped away and looked at the crowd, receiving only frightened stares and shaking heads in reply.

"Yer Highness," Maudie whispered, her face pale and her voice full of fear, "Whit dae we dae if they break through?"

A cold chill ran down Elinor's spine as she contemplated what Maudie had just asked. Slowly, she looked over to one of the tables, where she saw some plates and utensils that had not been removed when the Viking warriors left. Walking over to the table, Elinor reached down and picked up one of the knives. Lifting it up so she could get a better look at it, Elinor ran her thumb along the edge of the knife, wincing as it made a shallow cut on her thumb. A look of apprehension on her face, Elinor looked at the knife for a few more moments before grabbing a second one off the table and walking back over to Maudie, placing the second knife into the nanny's hand as she reached her.

"Yer Highness?" Maudie questioned, looking up at Elinor in confusion.

"Whitever comes through 'at door," Elinor said, leaning down at whisper in Maudie's ear, gripping the nanny's shoulder tightly with her free hand, "Whitever happens, ye hae tae promise me 'at th' Vandal will nae harm these children."

"Ah-Ah will protect them with ma life," Maudie replied nervously.

"Nae, Maudie, Ah daenae believe ye understand," Elinor said, pulling back and looking Maudie right in the eye, "Ah cannae imagine whit th' Vandal will dae. Ye cannae let them get their hands on th' children. Nae matter whit ye hae tae dae."

A look of horrible understanding passed over Maudie's features before she gave a quick nod, tears welling up in her eyes. As the two women talked, Will, Boyd and Andra stepped towards the door, weapons at the ready.

"Alright lads," Will said, holding his sword in front of him, his eyes focused on the door, "Ye know whit we've got tae dae, right?"

The two young men nodded their heads in reply, nervous expressions playing across their faces.

Another bang came from the door, followed by a crack as the door began to splinter, the angry voices from outside growing louder. Another blow struck the door and a hole was punched through the wood, large enough for the villagers to see the snarling face of a Vandal peering through. Elinor hesitantly stepped forward, the knife gripped tightly in her hand. Will glanced back at her and looked like he was going to tell her to stay back but another bang came from the door and it cracked violently, leaving enough room for a dozen Vandal to come streaming in.

The villagers screamed in terror as the Vendal rushed forward, snarling and roaring with weapons at the ready. Will stepped forward as one of the Vendal charged at him, ducking under the savage's wild swing and slashing him across the stomach with his claymore. As another Vendal swung his club at the young man, Will held up his sword and parried the blow. Spinning his sword around, Will pulled the Vendal closer before backhanding him hard across the face, sending the barbarian reeling. With his opponent off guard, Will took a step forward and kicked the Vendal in the chest, knocking the savage onto his back. As the Vendal tried to pick himself up, Will stepped over him before plunging his sword into the barbarian's chest, killing him.

As Will stood up and pulled his sword from the Vendal's body, another ran up behind him and struck the young man on the back of the head with his club. The blow knocked Will to his knees, the Vendal raising its club above its head to strike the young lord again. Before he could, he was speared by a javelin, knocking the Vendal off his feet and sending him flying through the air before he landed on the ground with the javelin sticking out of his chest. As Will clutched the back of his head in pain, he glanced in the direction the javelin had come from, seeing Andra standing on the other side of the room, giving him a small wave to which Will gave a thumbs up. Turning back to the battle, Andra found another Vendal charging at him. Leaning down, Andra managed to catch the Vendal as the savage leapt at him with his club raised. Using the Vendal's momentum against him, Andra spun around and lifted the savage up before tossing the barbarian into the air. The Vendal shouted in surprise and fear as he flailed his arms and legs before he crashed to the ground, laying in a broken heap on the stone.

As the Vendal charged in, Boyd stepped forward with his axe raised and his shield at the ready. As one Vendal swung a club at him, Boyd raised his shield and blocked the attack. Pushing back, he caused the Vendal to stumble backwards, allowing the young man to step forward and slam his axe into the barbarian's thigh. The Vendal screamed in pain as he fell to the ground, allowing Boyd to pull out his axe and drive it into the Vendal's neck.

As Boyd planted his foot on the Vendal's chest and pulled his axe out, another savage came charging at him. The Vendal leapt at Boyd with his club raised. Seeing the Vendal coming, Boyd stepped forward and lifted his shield above his head. The Vendal landed bodily on the shield, allowing Boyd to shift his weight and toss the Vendal over his head, causing the barbarian to land hard on his back. Before the Vendal could recover, Boyd spun around and slammed his axe onto the Vendal's chest, killing him.

One Vendal came rushing right at Elinor, reaching to grab the queen as he approached her. As the Vendal grabbed hold of her shoulder with his free hand, Elinor let out a shout of anger before plunging the knife into the Vendal's neck. The Vendal let out a choked cough of surprise, grabbing at the knife as blood poured out of the wound before he collapsed to the ground. Elinor looked down at the dying man in shock, not noticing another Vendal approaching her until he had grabbed her and thrown her to the ground.

Elinor hit the ground with a grunt of pain, the wind knocked out of her lungs. Before she could do anything, the Vendal straddled her and grabbed her throat, his fingernails digging into her flesh. Elinor

tried to struggle against the Vendal, but he held her down, snarling as he raised his club to strike her. Elinor's widened in horror before she clenched them in preparation for the oncoming blow.

Only the blow never came. Instead there was a wet thwacking sound and she felt the Vendal go rigid. Slowly, Elinor opened her eyes and looked up at the Vendal, who was frozen with a look of shock on his face. After a moment, he fell over, crumbling to the ground next to Elinor, revealing an arrow sticking out of his back. Looking back at the door, Elinor saw Merida standing on the table that had been barricading the door, still in the pose of just having fired an arrow from her bow.

"Merida," Elinor whispered with a mixture of shock and joy.

"Oi!" Merida called out, catching the four remaining Vendal's attentions, "Why daenae ye pick on saemeane yer own size fer a change?"

The four remaining Vendal looked at one another for a moment before turning back to Merida and snarling in fury.

"Alright then," Merida replied, a determined look on her face as she pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it in her bow, "Come on if ye think ye're hard enough!"

Roaring, the Vendal charged at her, prompting Merida to pull her bowstring back and take aim at the barbarians. Loosing the arrow, Merida hit one of the Vendal right between the eyes, knocking the savage onto his back.

Before Merida could draw another arrow, the Vendal were on her. Hopping forward, Merida planted her foot on one of the Vendal's face. Pushing it down, she used the Vendal's face as a springboard to hop into the air, before she spun around and kicked another barbarian on the chin. As the two Vendal reeled, Merida landed as the third rushed at her. Bringing her bow up, Merida blocked the Vendal as he swung his club at her. Pushing him back, Merida knocked the Vendal off balance, allowing the princess to spin her bow around and jam it into the Vendal's stomach. As the Vendal doubled over in pain, Merida grabbed the side of his head before driving her knee into his face, which connected with a crack. As the Vendal reeled, blood pouring from his broken nose, Merida rushed forward, swinging her bow and striking the barbarian on both sides of his head. With the Vendal dazed, Merida took a step forward and kicked him hard in the chest, knocking the savage to the ground.

As Merida reached for an arrow in her quiver, a Vendal grabbed her wrist from behind. Twisting around, Merida managed to pull the arrow from the quiver as she turned to face the Vendal. Striking with her knee, she drove it into the Vendal's groin. As the Vendal doubled over in pain, Merida slammed her free elbow into his face. The blow forced the Vendal to let go of Merida's wrist as he fell to the ground. Before the Vendal could recover, Merida knelt down on top of the savage's chest before driving the arrow into his neck. The Vendal gurgled in pain, blood pouring out of the wound as Merida pulled the arrow out and stood back up.

As Merida tried to regain her bearings, another Vendal ran up behind her and wrapped his arms around the princess. Merida struggled for a

moment before snapping her head backwards, smashing it against the Vandal's face. The Vandal grunted in pain as it released Merida, allowing her to spin around and drive the arrow into the Vandal's chest. The Vandal screamed in pain, as Merida planted her foot against his stomach and pushed him away, knocking the Vandal to the ground as she pulled the arrow out of his chest.

"Merida!" Elinor screamed, catching Merida's attention and prompting her to turn around to find the remaining Vandal charging at her. Quickly nocking the arrow, Merida rolled out of the way as the Vandal swung his club at her. Rising to one knee, she aimed her bow at the Vandal and loosed her arrow, striking the man right in the chest. The Vandal looked at the arrow sticking out of his chest for a moment in shock before collapsing to the ground.

"Is everyane alright?" Merida questioned as she turned her attention to the villagers, who had looks of relief on their faces.

"Ah think sae," Elinor said as Merida walked over to her side and helped her to her feet as Will, Andra and Boyd gathered around her.

Suddenly, a loud bang came from the door, causing it to crack as no less than eighteen Vandal came rushing in, snarling as they saw their fallen brethren. Their eyes going wide, Merida and the boys stepped in front of Elinor, the princess drawing another arrow and nocking it on her bowstring as the young lords prepared their weapons.

"Stay behind us, Ma," Merida said, eyeing each of the Vandal wearily.

"Merida, nae!" Elinor whispered nervously as she grabbed hold of her daughter's shoulder, trying to stop her, "Ye cannae fight 'at many!"

"We hae tae try," Merida said with a determined look, "Keep everyane else back."

With that, Merida and the young lords each took a step forward with their weapons at the ready, the Vandal snarling as they moved to surround them. Merida quickly glanced around, trying to keep her eye on all the Vandal at the same time. Suddenly, one of the Vandal came running at her, prompting Merida to turn towards him and loose her arrow, hitting the barbarian in the stomach, causing him to double over and fall to the ground. Before Merida could grab another arrow, a Vandal ran up and wrapped his arms around her. As Merida struggled, another Vandal rushed at her with his club raised. Lifting her legs up, Merida kicked the Vandal in the chest, causing him to stumble backwards. As Merida brought her legs back down, she tried to hit the Vandal holding her with the back of her head, but the barbarian dodged out of the way before lifting the girl up and slamming her onto the ground. Will moved to help her but was stopped as one of the Vandal slammed its club into his stomach, causing him to double over in pain. As Andra moved to help Merida, a number of Vandal jumped onto him, dragging the large Highlander to the ground. Boyd tried to help Andra but was hit across the face by another Vandal, sending him sprawling across the floor. As Merida tried to pick herself up, another Vandal reached down and grabbed her by the hair, causing the princess to shout in pain as the barbarians pulled her up to her knees. Snarling, the Vandal drew a rusty knife and brought it up to

Merida's neck, prepared to slice the princess' throat as her mother looked on in horror.

Suddenly, a large battleaxe came flying from the direction of the door, burying itself into the Vendal holding Merida's chest. The force of the blow knocked the Vendal off his feet before falling onto his back. Their eyes wide with surprise, the other Vendal turned to look at the doorway where Astrid was standing, still in the position of having just thrown her axe.

"She's not the only one who can make an entrance, you know," Astrid quipped, smirking.

Roaring, five of the Vendal went charging at Astrid. Planting her foot against the table that had been previously barring the door, Astrid gave it a push, which sent the table skidding across the ground. The table slammed into the Vendal, knocking a few of them to the side. As it struck one of them, the table flipped over and landed on the Vendal, crushing him.

Seeing an opportunity, Merida grabbed an arrow from her quiver as she stood back up before plunging it into one of the Vendal's back as he was distracted by Astrid's entrance. Pushing the Vendal to the ground as she pulled the arrow out, Merida nocked it on her bowstring and fired it, hitting another Vendal in the throat. As the Vendal collapsed to the ground, three of his compatriots turned and charged at Merida.

One Vendal swung his club at Merida, prompting her to roll under the attack. As she rolled to her knees, Merida found herself kneeling right in front of the Vendal that Elinor had killed, the knife still in his neck. Grabbing it, Merida yanked the knife out of the body before turning to face another Vendal as he charged her. The Vendal swung his club down at Merida, prompting the princess to sidestep the attack. The Vendal turned to swing back at Merida, but the Highlander managed to grab hold of the barbarian's arm, locking it into place before reaching out and stabbing the knife into the savage's chest. The Vendal croaked in pain before falling to the ground as Merida released him, allowing gravity to pull the knife back out.

As the other two Vendal charged at her, Merida turned to face them with the knife at the ready. One swung his club at her, prompting Merida to duck under the attack while slashing at the barbarian, cutting him on the side. As the Vendal stumbled away, his compatriot swung at Merida, prompting the princess to take a step backwards to dodge the blow. As the Vendal pressed his advantage, he swung his club at Merida from the side, but she managed to block the attack with both arms as she stepped closer to the barbarian. Swing her arm downward, Merida cut his arm, causing the Vendal to drop his club. As the Vendal shouted in pain, Merida turned to him and slashed the savage across his face. The Vendal stumbled back, holding his face in pain, allowing Merida to step forward and kick him in the chest, sending the barbarian stumbling backwards until he fell onto the floor.

Snarling, the first Vendal ran up and wrapped his arm around Merida's neck from behind, prompting the girl to stab the savage in the offending arm. The Vendal howled in pain, releasing his hold on Merida, allowing her to swing her arm down as she stabbed him in the side. The Vendal cried out again, before Merida pulled the knife out

a spun fluidly in a circle, slashing the Vendal's throat as she spun. As she spun back around, she hurled the knife, striking the second Vendal in the chest, causing them both to collapse to the ground at the same time.

As the Vendal fought with Merida, Will took the opportunity to grab his sword before spinning around and slashing the legs barbarian standing over him, flipping the man around before he fell to the ground. As Will stood up, he spun around and slammed his sword onto the prone Vendal, slicing off the barbarian's head. Turning towards where three Vendal were pinning Andra to the ground, Will ran over before kicking one, driving his foot into the barbarian's ribs. As the Vendal screamed in pain, he rolled off of Andra, allowing Will to stand over him and drive his sword into the barbarian, killing him.

With one of his hands free, Andra grabbed the Vendal pinning his other arm and pulled him off, sending the Vendal rolling across the ground. Standing up, Andra struggled with the Vendal that still clung to his back. After struggling for a few moments, Andra managed to pull the Vendal off his back and slam him onto the floor. Before the Vendal could recover, Andra drove one of his large fists into the savage's face, breaking his nose and cracking the barbarian's head against the stone floor.

Picking his discarded javelin from the floor, Andra turned towards the third Vendal that had been holding him down. Snarling, the Vendal charged at Andra who quickly brought his javelin to bear. Holding the weapon out in front of him, Andra caused the Vendal to skewer himself on the javelin. The Vendal groaned in pain as Andra pushed him to the ground before pulling the javelin out of the barbarian's body.

Growling, one of the Vendal held Boyd down, trying to wrap his hand around the young lord's throat. Struggling, Boyd managed to get the Vendal up near his mouth before he bit hard onto the appendage. The Vendal screamed in pain as he released his grip on Boyd's throat, allowing the young man to swing his fist up and strike the barbarian on the side of the head, sending him tumbling off of the young lord's chest. Picking himself up, Boyd ran over to where the Vendal lay on the ground and kicked him on the side of the head, sending the savage sprawling.

Picking up his axe and shield, Boyd turned to face another Vendal as it came charging at him. Blocking the Vendal's club, Boyd batted the weapon out of the way with his shield before swinging the shield back and striking the Vendal in the face. As the Vendal reeled, Boyd stepped forward and kicked the savage in the chest, sending the barbarian stumbling back. As the Vendal tried to recover, Boyd took another step forward and threw his axe at the savage, striking him in the chest and knocking the barbarian onto his back.

On the other side of the hall, the four remaining Vendal recovered and began to surround the unarmed Astrid. Astrid watched them all wearily, her hands clutched into fists as she waited for one of them to inevitably attack. With a roar, one Vendal did just that, charging at Astrid with his club raised to attack. Astrid easily dodged the Vendal's clumsy swing as he reached her, before kicking at the back of his foot with her own. The move knocked his foot into the air, leaving him unbalanced on a single foot. As the Vendal began to fall,

Astrid slammed her elbow into his face, shattering his nose and propelling him to the ground where his head met the stone floor with a loud crack.

Seeing their compatriot fall, the three remaining Vandal charged at Astrid as one. As the first reached her he swung his club at her, but Astrid managed to block the attack by reaching out and grabbing hold of the Vandal's wrist. As the second Vandal reached her, he swung at Astrid from the side but she managed to grab his wrist as well. Holding the two Vandal in place, Astrid took a step towards the third one as he charged her before kicking him square in the chest, the force of the blow managing to knock the barbarian off his feet and send him rolling across the ground. The two Vandal tried to free themselves of Astrid's grip but she twisted their arms, forcing them to drop their weapons as they let out shouts of pain. Pulling the two together, Astrid slammed the Vandal into one another. Letting go of their wrists as the Vandal stumbled away from one another, Astrid hopped into the air and did a split kick, hitting both barbarians in the chest and knocking them off their feet.

Landing, Astrid turned her attention towards the third Vandal, who had recovered and was moving to attack her again. Astrid ducked out of the way of the Vandal's first attack before grabbing onto his arm when he swung back. Giving it a twist, Astrid forced the Vandal to drop his weapon before she slammed her fist into his elbow, shattering it as his arm bent at an unnatural angle. As the Vandal screamed in pain, Astrid grabbed hold of his shoulders before stomping on his shin, breaking it. The Vandal quickly collapsed to the ground, allowing Astrid to drive her knee into his face, knocking the savage to the ground in a broken heap.

By then, the other two Vandal had recovered and moved to attack Astrid once more. One rushed her and threw a clumsy punch, which Astrid easily caught before using the Vandal's momentum to lift him off the ground and toss him away, sending him flying through the air a short distance before landing on the ground with a thud. The second threw a swing at her but Astrid blocked it with her arm before burying her fist into the Vandal's stomach, knocking the air from his lungs as he rose a short distance into the air before stumbling backwards. As the Vandal doubled over in pain, Astrid drove her knee into his face, sending him reeling. Reaching out, Astrid grabbed onto the Vandal's clothes before he could stumble away, bringing him back closer so she could deliver a hard headbutt to his face. As the Vandal reeled away again, Astrid grabbed one of his flailing arms, halting his momentum before yanking him back towards her as she stepped forward and smashed her fist into his face. The force shattered the Vandal's jaw, knocking some teeth free as he went spinning through the air and landed on the ground with a thud. As the final Vandal picked himself up, his back facing towards Astrid, the blonde walked up behind him, slamming her foot into the back of his knee. As the Vandal fell to his knees, Astrid reached up and grabbed his chin and the top of his head, before giving them a sharp twist, snapping his neck and causing the savage to collapse to the ground.

Looking over at Merida, Astrid wiped some sweat from her brow before walking over towards the princess, who was pulling Astrid's battleaxe out of a Vandal's body.

"You guys okay?" Astrid questioned.

"Aye, thanks," Merida replied, glancing at her friends for confirmation while handing Astrid the axe, prompting the girl to begin wiping the drying blood off the blade, "Where are Hiccup an' Fishlegs?"

"I don't know," Astrid answered with a shrug, "I just followed you to make sure you didn't get in over your head. Which you did, by the way."

"Daenae push it," Merida replied before turning back to her family and the group of villagers, "Is everyane alright?"

"Ah believe sae," Elinor said, stepping forward, placing her hands on Merida and Astrid's shoulders while smiling proudly at them both, "Thanks tae ye."

"It wasn't anything anyone else wouldn't have done, Your uh Highness," Astrid shrugged off the compliment awkwardly, prompting Merida to smirk at her. As they spoke, a familiar face moved through the group of villagers to get to the two girls.

"Astrid!" Ribbon Ingerman called as she hurried over to their side, "Princess Merida!"

"Mrs. Ingerman!" Astrid greeted the older woman with a smile, "I'm so glad you're alright!"

"Aye, Fishlegs will be relieved," Merida added with a smile of her own.

"Speaking of Fishlegs, where is he?" Ribbon questioned, playing with her hands nervously, "Is he alright?"

"He was with Hiccup the last time we saw him," Astrid explained, "I'm sure he's okay, Fishlegs can take care of himself."

"Oh, I wish I was as sure as you are, Astrid," Ribbon replied, biting her lip as she continued to play with her hands nervously. As the women talked, Hiccup came in with Snotlout and the twins following.

"Whoa," Snotlout said as he looked around at the dead Vendal, "What the Hel happened here?"

Astrid and Merida glanced at each other before smirking.

"We did," Merida commented, causing Snotlout's face to pale, "Whit happened tae ye lot?"

"I went to the smithy to grab some things," Hiccup explained, "I ran into Snotlout and the twins on the way here."

"Any idea about why th' Vendal are here?" Will questioned, cocking an eyebrow as he crossed his arms.

"Yeah," Hiccup replied with a nod as he turned his attention towards Merida, "I've got a pretty good idea."

"Hilde," Merida whispered in shock and horror, covering her mouth as

she gasped.

"Who's Hilde?" Tuff questioned in confusion.

"It's a long story," Astrid replied.

"We hae tae gae help her!" Merida exclaimed before pushing past the group and bolting through the door.

"Of course," Hiccup deadpanned with a sigh before turning to the others, "Come on!"

"Where are we going!?" Snotlout questioned as the group began to follow Hiccup.

"No time to explain!" Hiccup replied.

"You know, I'm getting really tired of that answer," Snotlout grumbled as he followed along with the others.

"Wait!" Astrid exclaimed, a hint of worry in her voice, "Where's Fishlegs?"

"I sent him to goâ€¦umâ€¦" Hiccup trailed off, glancing at the other teens before looking back at Astrid, "Getâ€¦someâ€¦.thingsâ€¦that might help us."

"Ohâ€¦" Astrid replied, nodding in understanding, "Okay."

"I'm sure he's fine," Hiccup stated with a shrug, as he ran out of the door, the others following him, "Fishlegs can take care of himself."

Meanwhile,

Fishlegs screamed at the top of his lungs as he ran as fast as he could through the village, a trio of Vandal chasing after him. Fishlegs half ran, half stumbled down the sloping road that connected to the arena. Turning a corner, he saw the cliff that looked over the arena, a set of stairs cut into the rock leading downwards. As he approached the stairs with the three Vandal chasing after him, a fourth came wandering up the staircase, his eyes going wide as she saw Fishlegs running towards him. As the Vandal tried to pull his club out to attack Fishlegs, the young man acted on instinct and charged the barbarian, giving him a hard shove that knocked the savage over the edge of the cliff, sending him screaming through the open air before slamming onto the ground with a loud crunch.

Turning, Fishlegs began making his way down the stairs as fast as he could, careful not to fall due to the treacherous footing that zigzagged down the cliffside. Glancing up, Fishlegs saw that the three Vandal were still chasing him. As Fishlegs made his way down a point where the stairs double backed on themselves, he reached up and grabbed one of the Vandal's legs as the savage passed above him. Giving the Vandal's legs a yank, he sent the barbarian tumbling over the side, the savage landing on his head with a sickening snap. Fishlegs grimaced as he looked down at the scene before letting out a yelp of fright as the two other Vandal roared as they drew closer to Fishlegs.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, Fishlegs ran towards the entrance to the arena, the Vandal scrambling after him. As Fishlegs reached the entrance to the arena, he found it open. Running inside, he gave the winch holding the portcullis open a hard kick. The heavy iron barrier came clattering down, landing right on top of one of the Vandal, crushing him with a loud bang. As the last Vandal stumbled to a stop, Fishlegs reached through the bars of the portcullis and grabbed the barbarian's shoulders before pulling him toward the gate, slamming the savage against the metal bars. The Vandal was dazed by the force of the blow, allowing Fishlegs to slam him against the bars a few more times before releasing the man's shoulders, allowing the now bleeding savage to fall to the ground with a thud.

Letting out a breath, Fishlegs smirked before turning to walk into the arena. As he did, he froze midstep, his eyes wide as he found six Vandal inside, all staring at him in surprise. Fishlegs and the Vandal stared at each other in silence for a few moments before the barbarians snarled, moving towards the young man with weapons at the ready.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me!" Fishlegs yelled in exasperation as the Vandal charged at him, their weapons raised to attack. Glancing to the side, he saw his warhammer that he had left in the arena during all the confusion earlier. Racing towards it, Fishlegs had almost reached the hammer when a Vandal slammed into him, grabbing hold of the young man with his arms and legs, sending the Viking teetering to the side as he tried to keep his footing. Fishlegs struggled with Vandal for a few moments before he managed to grab hold of the Vandal's clothes and pry the savage off of him, lifting the man above his head before slamming him against the ground.

Scrambling over to his hammer, Fishlegs managed to scoop it up midstride, stepping forward as a Vandal charged at him and swinging it, hitting the savage right in the chest, knocking the man off of his feet and sending him flying through the air a short distance before he landed and went rolling across the ground.

As the Vandal tried to pick himself up, Fishlegs hopped over him as the other Vandal ran after him. Running over to the pens where the dragons were kept, Fishlegs could hear the sounds of Boudica and Meatlug roaring and scratching frantically at the doors holding them in. Glancing over his shoulder, Fishlegs could see the two Vandal had recovered and now all six of them were moving to surround him, snarling as they closed in on the young man.

"Alright, six on one doesn't seem very fair to me," Fishlegs said, staring the Vandal down with a look of determination on his face, "How about we even these odds?"

Spinning around, Fishlegs slammed his hammer against the winch that held the barriers holding Boudica and Meatlug in their pens. As the winch was crushed under his hammer, the barricades went swinging free and the two doors slammed open as the dragons came charging out.

Boudica roared as she lashed out with her tail, sending a half a dozen spines flying through the air before they buried themselves into one of the Vandal, the force of the blows sending the savage

stumbling backwards before falling to the ground. Meatlug buzzed through the air before slamming into one of the Vendal, sending him flying before he slammed against a wall and slumped to the ground. Scooping up a few rocks in its mouth, Meatlug swallowed them before spinning around to face one of the Vendal and spat a fireball at him. The fireball exploded as it hit the Vendal in the chest, lighting him on fire and sending him screaming through the air before he landed in a burning heap on the arena floor. Screeching, Boudica leapt into the air before she came crashing down onto a Vendal, crushing the man underneath her bulk. As one of the Vendal tried to run, Boudica turned towards him and shot a blast of fire at the savage, engulfing him. The Vendal stumbled for a few moments, flailing his burning arms around before he collapsed to the ground. As the last Vendal tried to escape, Meatlug pounced on him, biting the Vendal around the waist with its massive mouth. Meatlug began shaking the Vendal around, worrying the man like a dog with a bone before tossing him aside, the Vendal slamming into a nearby wall before sliding to the ground upside down.

Fishlegs looked around at the devastation with a mixture of awe and fear as Boudica let out a shriek of victory while Meatlug let out a satisfied snort. Turning to Fishlegs, Meatlug wandered over, rubbing its nose against the young man. Smiling down at the dragon, Fishlegs scratched the Gronckle's head.

"Good job guys," Fishlegs congratulated the dragons, "Now come on. Let's go find the others."

With that, Fishlegs made his way towards the arena's entrance, opening the portcullis to allow the dragons to leave before leading them further into the village.

Meanwhile,

Mor'du crashed through the forests of Berk, some three dozen Vendal accompanying him. As they made their way through the woods, Mor'du would periodically stop and take a deep sniff of the air, which almost always resulted in him abruptly changing the direction they had been walking.

As they walked, one of the Vendal glanced to the side before doing a double take as he noticed something there. Floating not too far away was a wisp, the small, blue spirit beckoning him closer. Hesitantly, the Vendal began to walk towards the wisp, an entranced look on his face. The Vendal reached out towards the wisp, thinking of nothing more than reaching the spirit. Just before the Vendal could reach the wisp though, he felt a powerful hand grasp his shoulder and yank him back, prompting the wisp to disappear. Looking up, the Vendal found Mor'du towering over him, the Demon Bear glaring at the spot where the wisp had been. Reaching out, Mor'du pulled some of the brush aside, revealing a steep drop right where the wisp had been hovering, the fall being of such a height that it would have killed the Vendal if he had fallen over. The Vendal looked down at the drop with wide eyes before turning to look back at Mor'du.

"Don't follow the lights," Mor'du muttered before turning around, prompting the Vendal to follow behind him.

After what seemed like hours of walking in endless circles, Mor'du came to a halt, taking another sniff of the air before smiling

broadly.

"Your tricks can't hide you forever, witch," Mor'du said to himself as he reached into some brush and pulled it aside, revealing a ring of standing stones on the other side, "I know your smell so well I could follow you anywhere."

Stepping through the brush, Mor'du led the Vandal into the clearing. As they neared the standing stones, Mor'du could see the hunched form of Hilde standing in the middle of the circle, her back to him. As Mor'du approached, the crow on Hilde's shoulder turned around and cawed at him.

"Still holding on to that damned bird, I see," Mor'du sneered as he stopped a short distance away from Hilde, his men standing behind him, watching Hilde wearily.

"It seems you've finally caught up with me," Hilde observed as she turned to look at Mor'du, her mismatched eyes meeting with his.

"It took a while," Mor'du commented with a large grin, "But I think we both know it was inevitable. I don't think it was a stroke of luck that let me catch your scent that day a few months back. What's your angle here?"

Hilde said nothing as she continued to stare Mor'du down.

"Always keeping secrets," Mor'du stated, smiling and shaking his head in bemusement, "You haven't changed a bit."

"Neizer hafe you, Morten," Hilde observed, prompting Mor'du to laugh.

"Oh, it's been so long since I heard that name," Mor'du said between laughs before he leered down at Hilde, "It's so good to see you again, Mother."

A/N: So this chapter got away from me a little. Originally the plan was for this chapter and the next to be one but this one just got too long. I hope you guys liked the action in this one because there was plenty of it! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

34. The Bear and the Maiden Fair

Chapter 34: The Bear and the Maiden Fair

Merida raced up the hill towards the forest, approaching the house where she, Hiccup and Stoick lived. Running around the house, she came to the small stable where Angus was held, the horse whinnying and stomping his feet in agitation. The horse snorted as he watched Merida approach.

"Hello, Angus," Merida greeted as she pulled open the stable door, allowing the horse to trot out, "Sorry Ah haenae had th' time tae let ye stretch yer legs lately, but now Ah need ye at yer best. Ye feel up fer it?"

Angus snorted in reply as he shook his head and clomped his

foot.

"Good tae hear," Merida replied as she reached up and grabbed Angus' mane before pulling herself up onto the horse's back. Clicking her heels into Angus' side, Merida sent the horse galloping into the woods, the princess holding on tightly as she rode the Clydesdale bareback through the forest.

As Merida rode Angus into the woods, Hiccup and the others came running up the hill.

"She took Angus," Will observed as they reached the top of the hill.

"Where is she going?" Ruff questioned.

"Same place we're going," Hiccup commented as he moved towards the woods, prompting the others to begin following him.

"And where, exactly, is that?" Tuff echoed his sister's question.

"We're going to get lost in the woods," Hiccup replied ominously as he led the group into the forest, the twins sharing questioning looks before following as well.

As the group entered the forest, Merida was riding Angus hard ahead of them, dodging around the trees and hopping over rocks in her goal to get to Hilde as quickly as possible. As she rode, Merida scrunched her eyes closed, riding blindly through the forest. After a few tense moments, Merida heard Angus whinny in surprise and fear, before he came to a sudden halt, almost throwing Merida off his back. Opening her eyes, Merida found herself in the clearing with the stone circle, on the opposite side from the large group of Vendal. Hilde and Mor'du stood in the middle of the standing stones, the massive man looming over the old woman. Mor'du grinned as he caught sight of Merida, turning to look at her as she looked at him in surprise.

"Well, isn't this a happy coincidence?" Mor'du asked with a chuckle, "I was hoping to run into you while I was here, cub."

"Ye stay away from her!" Merida shouted, unslinging her bow and quickly nocking an arrow as she pointed it at Mor'du.

"Oh dear," Mor'du said in mock fear before snorting with laughter, "You've got me shaking in my britches!"

Merida ignored the jab, keeping her bow trained on him, Angus snorting in agitation.

"So, what's the plan here, cub?" Mor'du questioned, "You ride in here, kill me and my boys and save the day?"

"Saemethin' like 'at," Merida replied, the string of her bow quivering from stored energy.

"I'd like to see you try," Mor'du sneered as he drew his sword and axe, letting the heavy blades thud against the ground.

"Ye're about tae," Merida growled as she slid off of Angus' back, her

weapon still trained on Mor'du. Mor'du let out a chuckle as one of the Vendal growled and made a move towards Merida, stopped when his chief held up a finger.

"Now, now, boys," Mor'du chided, glancing back at the Vendal and grinning, "You all know the rules."

Slowly, he turned back around and grinned sadistically at Merida.

"I always get first dibs," Mor'du stated as he licked his lips eagerly before rushing at Merida. As Mor'du ran at her, Merida loosed her arrow, the missile shooting straight at the Demon Bear. Mor'du lifted his sword with frightening speed, batting the arrow away without breaking stride. Her eyes widening, Merida rolled to the side as Mor'du reached her and slammed his axe onto the ground, the blade digging a deep furrow into the ground. Angus let out a scream of panic as he moved away from Mor'du as Merida rolled to her feet while drawing another arrow and nocking it on her bowstring. Turning to Mor'du, she pulled the string back and fired another arrow at the Demon Bear, who managed to bat the arrow away with his sword again.

"You're going to have to do better than that, cub!" Mor'du laughed as he turned and charged at Merida again. As Mor'du approached her, a large cloud of fog suddenly enveloped Merida, hiding her from the Demon Bear. Mor'du stumbled to a stop, growling in annoyance as he glanced around with his good eye.

"More of your tricks, witch?" Mor'du growled in annoyance as he began sniffing at the air.

"I zought you would know by now, boy," Hilde's voice came through the fog, full of disdain as the ground began to rumble beneath Mor'du's feet, "I am no mere conjurer of cheap tricks."

Looking down, Mor'du saw the ground break open from underneath him before a tangle of long roots shot out. The roots reached out and wrapped around Mor'du's limbs, trying to hold the Demon Bear in place. Roaring in fury, Mor'du struggled against the roots as they tried to grasp hold of him. Snarling, Mor'du dug his teeth into one of the roots, pulling it loose and allowing him to yank his arm free. With his arm free, Mor'du began to swing his massive sword around and slashing the other roots off.

"Find that hag, boys!" Mor'du called into the fog, "Lock her down!"

Snarling, the Vendal moved into the fog, looking for Hilde. Each of them slowly began to spread out, carefully making their way through the fog, looking for any sign of the old woman. As one Vendal was looking for her, he heard the sound of a crow cawing loudly. He spun around, trying to find the source of the noise. Looking around, he found nothing but the rolling strands of the fog. The cawing came again, seeming to completely surround the Vendal, causing him to panic and spin wildly around, desperately trying to find Hilde. He turned around, and suddenly found himself staring into Hilde's mismatched eyes, causing him to freeze in place.

"Guten tag," Hilde greeted before raising her hand and snapping her fingers, causing the earth to suddenly open up beneath the Vendal's

feet and swallow him whole. As the Vendal tried to escape, Hilde snapped her fingers again, causing the hole to close up, the heavy earth blocking out the Vendal's screams. Hearing their comrade's screams, two more Vendal emerged from the fog and moved towards Hilde with their weapons raised. As the Vendal ran at her, Hilde snapped her fingers again, causing a long root to erupt from the ground behind the Vendal. Wrapping around one of the Vendal's legs, the root lifted the savage off of his feet before flinging him away, sending the man screaming through the air as he disappeared.

Giving a worried look back at the root, the remaining Vendal continued to run at Hilde. As the Vendal charged, Hilde's crow leapt off of the witch's shoulders and went flying at the savage. Cawing loudly, the crow swooped at the Vendal's face and began attacking the man with its claws. The Vendal cries of panic mixed with the crows cawing and the flapping of its black wings as he flailed around in panic. Watching the scene before her, Hilde lifted up her hand and snapped her fingers, causing the one crow to burst him into an entire murder of crows. The crows flapped around and clawed at the Vendal, completely covering him. Suddenly, the cloud of crows fell to the ground as the Vendal stumbled. Abruptly, all the crows became silent and still, forming a solid black form on the ground. Then, just as suddenly, the crows took to the air, flying in every direction in a cacophony of sound. As the dispersed, all that was left on the ground was a single crow, the Vendal having completely vanished. It turned towards Hilde and cawed, ruffling its feathers.

"Yes, you did very vell," Hilde commented with a smile, unaware of the shadow approaching her from behind through the fog. Seeing it the crow let out a warning call, prompting Hilde to turn around, just in time to find a Vendal swinging its club at her. The club struck Hilde on the side of the head, knocking her to the ground, a thin stream of blood trailing from her temple. As Hilde lay on the ground, the fog slowly dissipated, leaving the area as clear as it had been a short while before.

Looking around, Mor'du smiled as he saw the fog dissipate, seeing one of the Vendal lift the unconscious Hilde onto his shoulder. Glancing to his side, he saw Merida with an arrow notched onto her bowstring, a look of horror on her face as she saw the unconscious Hilde.

"Nicely done, boys," Mor'du stated with a grin before turning his attention back towards Merida, "Now, where were we, cub?"

Before Merida could react, Mor'du rushed at her with his weapons at the ready. As he slammed his axe down, Merida rolled to the side, avoiding the attack as it shook the ground. As Merida avoided the attack, Mor'du lashed out with his sword, smashing it into the ground in front of her, trapping her between the two blades. Looking up at Mor'du, Merida saw the Demon Bear smile at her before stepping forward and lifting his foot up to smash down onto her. Before he could, something smashed into him from the side, sending him stumbling away and forcing him to drop his weapons.

As Mor'du tried to regain his balance, he glanced to his side, seeing Angus rearing up on his hind legs and kicking his front legs in the air as he let out a loud whinny. Before Mor'du could recover, Angus spun around and gave the Demon Bear a hard kick in the chest, knocking him back, causing him to slam into one of the stone

monoliths which cracked as he slammed against it. Pushing his advantage, Angus ran up and slammed his front legs against Mor'du's chest, bashing him against the stone monolith, which cracked even further. Spinning around, Angus gave Mor'du another hard kick, knocking him against the monolith, which began to shake as it cracked all the way through. Roaring in frustration, Mor'du pushed off of the monolith, causing the top to shake and begin breaking away. Grabbing hold of Angus' leg as the horse tried to kick him again, Mor'du threw the Clydesdale to the ground, the horse whinnying in pain and fear as he rolled across the ground and tried to regain his footing.

"You think you can do me in just like that, little pony!?" Mor'du snarled, failing to notice as the top of the monolith began to topple towards him, "If you think you can do me in with a few kicks, you're-"

Mor'du was cut off as the monolith toppled forward onto him, crushing him against the ground. Merida looked on in surprise before rushing over to Angus' side, slinging her bow around her shoulders and patting the horse on his flank. Looking over at the Vendal, she saw looks of fear and apprehension in their eyes as they looked down at their fallen leader.

"Brilliant, Angus!" Merida exclaimed as she hugged the horse, who snorted proudly, "Ah think 'at did it!"

"No," a growl came from behind Merida, causing her blood to run cold and her eyes to go wide, "I think not."

Turning around, Merida saw Mor'du pushing himself to his feet, slowly lifting the stone monolith off of him. As the monolith began to slide off him, Mor'du reached up and grabbed the large stone. Standing up, Mor'du lifted the monolith over his head, grinning savagely down at Merida and Angus as they looked at him in horror.

"My turn," he stated before swinging the monolith around and slamming it into Angus' side, the stone connecting with horse with an ugly snapping noise. The force of the blow knocked Angus off his feet, slamming him into Merida and knocking her to the side. Angus slammed against the ground, screeching in pain and fear as his legs stuck out at unnatural angles. As Merida tried to push herself to her feet, she gripped her head in pain, looking up as Mor'du tossed the broken monolith aside, the stone hitting the ground with a loud thud. As Merida tried to recover, she watched in horror as Mor'du walked over to Angus' side, looking down at the horse as it writhed in pain.

"Looks like you got a broken leg there," Mor'du commented, looking down at Angus' shattered leg, "I'm going to have to put you down, little pony."

Before Merida or Angus could react, Mor'du reached down and grabbed the Clydesdale by his head. Angus struggled for a few moments, screeching as he tried to pull his head from Mor'du's grasp, but the Demon Bear held strong before jerking the Clydesdale's head sharply to the side with a loud crack, causing the horse to go still. Grinning, Mor'du let Angus go as he stood back up, causing the horse's body to slump to the ground right in front of Merida. Merida stared at Angus' body for a few long, horrible moments a look of shock on her face. Then, an expression of utter sorrow slowly crossed

her face as her eyes filled with tears.

"ANGUS!" Merida wailed as she stumbled over to the Clydesdale's side, wrapping her arms around the horse's neck as she buried her head into his mane and began to weep bitterly.

"Oh, so sad," Mor'du commented with a sadistic chuckle, "Did I kill your little pony, cub?"

Merida said nothing, raising her head to glare hatefully at Mor'du, hot tears running down her cheeks as she seethed.

"And now," Mor'du continued as he reached over and picked up his sword before pulling it around and pointing it at Merida's neck, "I'm going to kill you. What do you have to say about that, cub?"

Merida said nothing in return, her glare never wavering.

"Spiteful until the end," Mor'du observed with a smirk, "I admire that."

Without another word, Mor'du lifted his sword up and prepared to slam his sword down onto Merida. Before he could, there was a loud twang before an arrow slammed into Mor'du's raised bicep, burying deep in his flesh. Mor'du let out a hiss of pain and surprise before freezing in his swing and turning to look in the direction that the attack had come in. Standing near the edge of the woods was Hiccup and the other teenagers, Hiccup still pointing the now empty crossbow at Mor'du.

"Well, cub, looks like your friends want to play too," Mor'du sneered as he reach up and yanked the arrow out of his bicep, a glob of blood bubbling from the small wound as he tossed the missile aside, "Your little toy packs quite the punch, little fish."

Hiccup said nothing in return as he lowered his crossbow, as most of his friends looked up at Mor'du in fear.

"I take it you and your friends want to scrap," Mor'du commented, motioning to the Vendal standing to the side as Hiccup reloaded his crossbow and the others began to play with their weapons nervously, "We'll me and my boys are always ready for a scrap!"

As Hiccup finished reloading his crossbow, he and his friends looked around as the Vendal as the barbarians moved to surround them, snarling at the gathered teenagers.

"You guys ready for this?" Hiccup questioned as he looked around at the Vendal prepared to attack them.

"Kind of late to be asking that," Tuff observed, gripping his spear tightly.

"Man, I don't even understand what's going on right now," Ruff commented as she idly twirled her knife with her fingers, "But whatever, we're here, they're here, let's get these guys."

"'At's th' spirit, lass," Will commented with a smirk as he held his sword out in front of him.

"We're with you, Hiccup," Astrid said, determination written across her features.

"You're going to have to do a lot of explaining after this though, cuz," Snotlout commented as he beat his mace against his open palm.

"Deal," Hiccup commented with a nod, his eyes locked with Mor'du as the Demon Bear grinned at him manically, "Now, let's do this."

Meanwhile,

The wind whistled past Fishlegs' ears as he rode Meatlug through the air over the village, gripping onto the Gronckle's spines to keep himself mounted. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Boudica flying behind them, obediently following the young man and his dragon. Looking around, Fishlegs saw a group of people gathering outside of the Great Hall. Indicating towards the group, Fishlegs guided Meatlug over to them, Boudica following behind them.

The crowd of villagers gasped and moved away quickly as Meatlug and Boudica landed on the ground, kicking up a small cloud of dust as Fishlegs slid off the Gronckle's back. Looking around, Fishlegs tried to find someone, a smile crossing his face as he spotted them.

"Mom!" he called out, catching his mother's attention, a look of excitement and relief passing over Ribbon's features as she rushed over to her son's side and enveloped him in a hug which he gladly returned.

"Fishlegs!" Ribbon exclaimed as she pulled away and looked at her son, "Oh, Fishlegs, I'm so glad you're okay."

"Yeah, nothing to worry about, Mom," Fishlegs replied with a chuckle. As he did,

Meatlug looked at Ribbon curiously before waddling over to her and giving the Viking woman a curious sniff.

"Oh!" Ribbon exclaimed, jumping in surprise as Meatlug continued to sniff her, "Um, uh, h-hello."

"Don't worry, Mom, it's okay," Fishlegs said with a chuckle, "Meatlug won't hurt you."

"A-Alright," Ribbon said, looking no more comfortable than she had before as she reached out and gently pat Meatlug on the head, "It'sâ€¦nice to meet you, Meatlug."

Meatlug responded by shaking its head under Ribbon's hand and purring.

"Aw," Ribbon cooed, "You're actually kind of cute. Aren't you a goodâ€¦umâ€¦."

Ribbon paused, looking down at Meatlug in confusion before turning her attention back to Fishlegs.

"Fishlegs," Ribbon asked perplexedly, "Is Meatlug a girl or a boy?"

There was a pause as Fishlegs looked down at Meatlug before turning back to his mother and shrugging his shoulders.

"I honestly have no idea, Mom," Fishlegs replied before looking over the ground, many of whom were looking fearfully at the two dragons, "What happened here?"

"We all came to the Great Hall looking for shelter," Ribbon explained, "But the Vandal followed us there."

"The Vandal attacked you guys?" Fishlegs questioned, concerned, "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Ribbon answered with a nod, "Thanks to your friends."

"You've seen them?" Fishlegs questioned anxiously, "Where did they go?"

"I don't know," Ribbon stated, shaking her head, "The princess said something about a Hilde and ran off with the others following her."

"Hilde," Fishlegs stated, a look of realization passing over his face, "Of course, that's what he's here for."

"Fishlegs, what's going on?" Ribbon questioned, a look of concern plastered across her features.

"There's no time to explain, Mom," Fishlegs replied, "How long ago did they leave?"

"Just a few minutes ago," Ribbon replied, "It looked like they were heading towards the woods. They're probably there already."

"Alright, thanks, Mom," Fishlegs said as he pulled himself back up onto Meatlug's back, the Gronckle buzzing its wings as it prepared to take off, "I have to go help them. You stay here, I think it's safe in the village now."

"Okay," Ribbon said as she played with her hands nervously, "Be careful, sweetie!"

"Don't worry, Mom!" Fishlegs answered as Meatlug buzzed into the air, Boudica following behind, "I will!"

With that, Meatlug turned and took off into the sky, Boudica soaring after them. As they flew over the forest, he looked around for any sign of the circle of standing stones, growing more frustrated with every passing moment.

"You'd think I'd at least be able to find it while flying," Fishlegs groaned, "This is why I really don't like magic."

After flying around for another few frustrating seconds, Fishlegs pulled Meatlug to a stop, hovering in the air as he thought.

"The way we find it on the ground is by getting lost in the woods," Fishlegs mused, "But how do you get lost in the sky?"

As Fishlegs pondered the question, he remembered the night they had all gone to the Nest, how Meatlug had picked him and Astrid up and spun them around so much he couldn't tell up from down anymore.

"That's it!" Fishlegs explained before catching Meatlug's attention, "Meatlug, I need you to spin! Spin as fast as you can!"

Meatlug grunted and looked up at Fishlegs in confusion, clearly not understanding what the young man wanted it to do. Sighing in frustration, Fishlegs sat up and began waving his arms around spastically and rolling his head around. After a few seconds of this, Fishlegs paused as he noticed Boudica hovering next to him, the Nadder giving the young man a very questioning look.

"What?" Fishlegs asked, giving the Nadder a confused look. As he did, Meatlug suddenly lurched forward as it began to barrel roll through the sky. Fishlegs let out a cry of surprise, gripping onto Meatlug tightly in order to avoid being thrown off.

"Alright, Meatlug!" Fishlegs called, patting the Gronckle on the side in an attempt to catch its attention, "That's enough!"

At his command, Meatlug lurched to a stop, the sudden change in momentum almost throwing Fishlegs off the Gronckle's back. Pulling himself back up into a sitting position, Fishlegs watched as the world spun around him, his sense of balance having been thrown completely off.

"Alright!" Fishlegs shouted as he struggled to stay upright on Meatlug's back, "Fly to the forest, Meatlug! Quick!"

Obediently, Meatlug dove towards the forest, the trees spinning in front of Fishlegs as they plummeted through the air. He wasn't lost, but he sure as Hel had no idea where he was going.

Meanwhile,

The Vendal rushed forward, roaring as they charged at the assembled group of teenagers. As one reached them, Astrid stepped forward and swung her axe at him, driving the blade into the Vendal's chest and knocking him onto the ground. Planting her foot against the Vendal's chest, she pulled the axe out and before stepping over his body and spinning her axe around, smashing it into another Vendal, knocking him off his feet and sending him tumbling end over end before he slammed face first onto the ground. As another Vendal charged at her with his club raised to attack, Astrid moved to confront him. The Vendal leapt at her, swinging his club down at her. Astrid raised her axe, blocking the club with the handle. Twisting her axe, she turned the Vendal's attack aside, using the man's momentum to send him stumbling away. As the Vendal tried to catch himself, Astrid ran up behind him and drove her axe into his back, knocking him face first into the ground.

At the same time, Will moved to face one of the Vendal as the savage charged at him. As the Vendal swung his club at him, Will swung his

sword to parry, his steel sword slicing through the savage's bone club. As the Vendal reeled from the parry, Will swung his sword back around, slashing the savage across the chest, sending the barbarian spinning to the ground. As another Vendal charged at him, he ducked under the savage's club swing before slamming his shoulder into the man's stomach. Standing up, Will lifted the Vendal up before flipping the savage into the air and slammed him onto the ground. Turning around, Will spun his sword and drove it into the Vendal's chest. Before he could pull his sword out, another Vendal attacked him, swinging his club at Will's head. Will quickly ducked under the swing as he pulled his sword free and swung it upwards, slashing the Vendal across the chest and knocking the barbarian onto his back.

Moving to join the fight, Ruffnut spun her hatchet and knife in her hands as a Vendal rushed at her. As the Vendal swung at her, Ruff parried the attack with her hatchet. Twisting around, Ruff spun behind the Vendal, keeping his club entangled with her hatchet and yanking his arm behind his back. With the Vendal trapped, Ruff plunged her knife into the man's back before she planted her foot against him and shoved him to the ground. As another Vendal moved to attack her, Ruff ducked under the savage's wild swing. As she avoided the attack, Ruff twisted around and slammed her hatchet into the Vendal's calf. As the Vendal fell to the ground, Ruff twisted back around and slammed her knife into the man's chest. As she put her fist against the Vendal's chest and pushed him away, pulling her knife out, a Vendal ran up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. The Vendal lifted her into the air, prompting Ruff to kick her legs in an effort to get out of the man's hold. Thinking quickly, Ruff kicked both her feet and lurched her whole body forwards, causing her to flip the Vendal over her shoulder. As the Vendal landed on his back, Ruff quickly stood up before slamming her hatchet onto the Vendal's chest, killing him. As Ruff stood up and pulled her hatchet from the Vendal's body, she took a moment to look down at the dead man, raising her hand to wipe the sweat off her forehead. As she did, she felt something on her forehead, before she pulled her hand down and looked at it, finding blood on her. She quickly wiped the blood off her hand and forehead, a surprised look on her face.

At the same time, Tuffnut was charging at a Vendal, screaming at the top of his lungs as he raised his double headed spear. Taking a flying leap forward, Tuff thrust his spear forward, driving it into the Vendal's chest. The force of Tuff's momentum knocked the Vendal onto his back. As the Vendal landed on his back, Tuff's spear bent slightly before springing back up, launching Tuff into the air as the spear pulled free from the Vendal's body. Flying a short distance through the air, he slammed into another Vendal, knocking the man to the ground, Tuff tumbling along with him. Quickly standing back up, Tuff found another Vendal charging at him as the one he knocked down tried to pick himself up. As Tuff pulled his spear back to thrust it at the charging Vendal, he accidentally drove the other end of his spear into the recovering Vendal. Tuff looked back in surprise before pulling his spear out, accidentally driving the front end into the Vendal who was charging him, stopping the savage cold. Tuff quickly looked back at the Vendal as he slid off the spear and fell to the ground. Tuff looked down at the bodies in shock before glancing at his spear, blood dripping from both ends.

Andra turned to face one of the Vendal as the savage charged at him. Planting his feet, Andra hurled one of his javelins at the Vendal, striking the man in the chest and knocking him off his feet. As the

first Vendal fell to the ground, Andra turned to face a second one charging at him. Gripping his other javelin with both hands, he spun towards the other Vendal and swung it at the savage, slamming the weapon against the man's chest and knocking him off the ground. The Vendal fell hard on his back, groaning in pain. Before the Vendal could pick himself up, Andra stepped forward and kicked him on the side of the head, sending the man sprawling. Another Vendal screamed as he leapt at Andra, his club raised to attack. Turning towards the Vendal, Andra reached out and grabbed the man by the throat. The Vendal gagged and struggled for a moment before he slammed the man against the ground, the savage gurgling in pain before going silent.

Snotlout screamed as a Vendal rushed at him with his club raised. Snotlout dodged out of the way as the Vendal swung at him. As the Vendal pulled his club back, Snotlout swung at him with his mace, smacking the man in the face, the force of the blow knocking the man onto his back. As the Vendal tried to pick himself up, Snotlout stepped over him and slammed his mace down onto the man, ensuring he stayed down. As another Vendal charged at him, Snotlout ducked under his wild swing before slamming his mace into the man's gut. While the Vendal doubled over in pain, Snotlout stood up and slammed his mace against the man's back, knocking the savage to the ground. Before the Vendal could recover, Snotlout swung his mace low and struck the Vendal hard on the side of the head, cracking the man's skull. Standing up, Snotlout turned to face the Vendal charging at him. As the Vendal swung his club at Snotlout, the young man managed to dodge out of the way of the attack. Pressing his advantage, Snotlout struck the Vendal on the arm with his mace, causing the Vendal to scream in pain as he dropped his club. While the Vendal was writhing in pain, Snotlout swung his mace again and struck the man across the face, sending him spinning to the ground. As the Vendal tried to push himself to his feet, Snotlout stepped forward and hit the savage on the back of his head, sending the man falling to the ground, blood oozing out of his head. Snotlout rested his hands against his knees, breathing heavily as he looked down at the dead Vendal.

As one of the Vendal charged at him, Boyd moved to meet him head on. Swinging his club at Boyd, the Vendal attempt to strike the young lord on the side of the head. Raising his shield, Boyd blocked the attack with his shield, knocking the attack to the side before he slammed his shield against the Vendal's face, knocking the man back. As the Vendal stumbled backwards, Boyd stepped forward with his shield raised and slammed his shield into the man's chest, sending the barbarian sprawling. Stepping over the Vendal, Boyd lifted his foot up and smashed it against the man's face. As Boyd took a step backwards, another Vendal ran up behind him and leapt onto the young man's back. Boyd struggled with the Vendal for a few moments, using all of his strength to keep from falling over under the heavier man's weight. Grunting in effort, Boyd managed to flip the Vendal off his back and slam him against the ground. Before the Vendal could recover, Boyd smashed his axe into the savage's chest. As Boyd pulled his axe out of the Vendal's body, another came charging at him. Stepping forward, Boyd hurled his axe at the Vendal, but the man managed to dodge out of the way and continued to charge at the young lord. Thinking quickly, Boyd unstrapped his shield and hurled it at the Vendal, the heavy wooden shield hitting the savage square in the face, breaking the man's nose and knocking him onto the ground. Leaping onto the Vendal before he could recover, Boyd began pounding on the man's face with his fists. Eventually, Boyd stood up as he

looked down at the man's face, which he had left a bloody pulp before retrieving his weapons.

As the others fought with the assembled Vendal, Hiccup moved towards Mor'du, his crossbow still trained on the Demon Bear. Mor'du grinned down at Hiccup, licking his lips as he adjusted his grip on his weapons.

"You think you can kill me with your little toys, boy?" Mor'du questioned as he began circling Hiccup like a predator stalking its prey, "The cub's little pony tried kill me by dropping a rock on me, and that didn't work. What hope do you have?"

Hiccup's look of determination never wavered but he did glance over to where Merida was still hunched over Angus' body.

"I'll make you pay for that," Hiccup growled as he focused on Mor'du again.

"Oh, will you now?" Mor'du questioned with an amused laugh before his eyes narrowed, "Alright, little fish, make me pay."

As if on cue, Hiccup pointed his crossbow at Mor'du and pulled the trigger, sending an arrow flying towards the Demon Bear. Sneering, Mor'du lifted his sword to block, but the arrow was flying faster than he anticipated and he missed it by a split second, the missile burying itself into the Demon Bear's shoulder. Mor'du hissed in pain and surprise as he looked at the offending arrow before turning his ire towards Hiccup.

"That's quite the toy you got there," Mor'du observed as he pulled the arrow out and tossed it aside, blood oozing from the wound, "One problem though."

"What's that?" Hiccup questioned as he lowered the crossbow.

"Now it's empty," Mor'du replied before he came barreling towards Hiccup with his weapons at the ready. A look of panic crossed Hiccup's face as he dove to the side, dropping his crossbow and dodging just as Mor'du slammed his axe against the ground, tearing up a large chunk of the earth. As Hiccup tried to pick himself up, he found himself face to face with a Vendal warrior. The man screamed in Hiccup's face as he raised his club to strike the young man. Before he could, an arrow came flying in from over Hiccup's shoulder and hit the Vendal right between the eyes, sending him falling to the ground. Looking back, Hiccup found Merida standing over Angus' body, her bow pointed towards him, her icy blue eyes red from crying.

"Kill the girl!" Mor'du ordered as he advanced towards Hiccup, "This little fish is mine to gut!"

Turning around to face Mor'du, Hiccup rolled forward to avoid the swing of the Demon Bear's axe. Rolling to his feet right in front of Mor'du, Hiccup slashed at the Demon Bear's leg with his sword. Mor'du hissed in pain before backhanding Hiccup with his massive fist, sending the young man tumbling through the air before he landed in a heap on the ground, groaning in pain as his sword clattered across the earth a few feet away from him.

"Hiccup!" Merida called in dismay, nocking an arrow and aiming it at

Mor'du. Before she could fire it, another Vendal rushed at her, forcing her to turn towards the man and fire it at him. The arrow struck the man in the chest, sending him stumbling to the ground. Before Merida could draw another arrow, a Vendal rushed at her, screaming at the top of his lungs. Dodging the Vendal's wild attack, Merida spun around him and looped her bow around the man's neck before pulling back, yanking the savage back. Turning her back to the Vendal, Merida pulled her bow over her shoulder, flipping the man over and slamming him face first onto the ground. As the Vendal tried to pick himself up, Merida booted him hard in the side of his head, sending him sprawling.

"That's the best you've got, little fish?" Mor'du questioned as he stalked towards Hiccup as the young man shook his head clear and struggled to his feet, "I expected someone of your pedigree to put up more of a fight. How disappointing."

Mor'du stopped as he stood over Hiccup, grinning down as the young man looked up at him in fear.

"What's the matter, little fish?" Mor'du asked, "All out of tricks?"

Looking up past Mor'du, Hiccup saw something that made his eyes widen in surprise.

"All out of tricks," Hiccup commented, "But I still have a surprise."

Mor'du quirked an eyebrow in confusion at Hiccup, but before he could say anything, Hiccup dove to the ground and covered his head a second before a fireball slammed into Mor'du's back. As Mor'du stumbled to the side, smoke rising from where he had been struck on his shoulder, Fishlegs came buzzing down on the back of Meatlug, Boudica sweeping down behind them.

As Fishlegs swung off of Meatlug's back, a Vendal came charging at him with his weapon at the ready. Seeing the Vendal coming, Fishlegs took a step forward and swung his hammer at the man, the iron hammerhead connecting with the savage's chest with a loud crack and knocking him clear off his feet and onto his back. As another Vendal moved to attack, Meatlug bounced forward and slammed its head into the man's chest, sending him sprawling. Seeing another Vendal approaching, Boudica flicked her tail at him, sending spines flying through the air before they filled the savage up like a pincushion and he collapsed to the ground.

Looking around at his dead men and the gathered teens and dragons, a small smile crept across Mor'du's face, even as smoke continued to rise from his back.

"Well, it seems I've underestimated all of you," Mor'du observed as he began to move away towards where Hilde was laying on the ground, "Won't be a mistake I'll be making again."

"Ye waenae be makin' any mistakes ever again!" Merida shouted as she pointed another arrow at Mor'du, "We're endin' this now!"

"No, I don't think so, cub," Mor'du replied as he bent down and scooped Hilde up before throwing her over his shoulder, "I think me

and my mother are going to leave now."

"M-Mother!?" Merida gasped in shock and confusion, Mor'du's words eliciting similar reactions from Hiccup, Fishlegs and Astrid, "Hilde's yerâ€|mother!?"

"Oh, she never told you?" Mor'du questioned, a look of surprised amusement on his face as he reached the edge of the woods, "Funny that. Yes, she is my dear old mum, and we've got a lot of catching up to do, so if you don't mind."

As he spoke, Mor'du reached out and grabbed a small tree with one hand before yanking it out and holding it above his head, grinning all the while.

"We'll be going now," he finished before hurling the tree at the teens, forcing them to scatter and dive for cover as the tree slammed into the ground. They recovered quickly, but by the time they looked back to where Mor'du had been standing, he was gone.

"He's gone!" Merida exclaimed as she moved towards where Mor'du had been only moments before, "Come on! We hae tae-"

She was cut off as Hiccup stepped forward and placed his hand on his shoulder, stopping her. She turned to look at Hiccup in confusion, seeing him slowly shake his head at her.

"He outpaces us," Hiccup explained, a grim look on his face, "We'll never catch him."

Merida stared at him for a few moments before tear welled up in her eyes and she let out a shrill cry of agony and frustration before falling to her knees and burying her face in her hands. She remained that way, quietly crying into her hands as Hiccup gripped her shoulder. Seeing Merida's state, Boudcia wandered over and bump the princess with her nose, cooing sadly, prompting the redhead to turn and wrap her arms around the Nadder's nose.

"Now what do we do?" Fishlegs questioned, breaking the silence.

"We can't let him get away with this," Astrid growled angrily.

"And we won't," Hiccup said determinedly, raising his head to look at the others.

"Whit dae ye plan tae dae?" Will asked.

"He took the fight to us," Hiccup replied, pointing at the ground, "Now, I say, we take the fight to him."

A/N: Another big chapter. Hope you guys liked it, a lot of emotions in this one! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

35. I See Fire

Chapter 35: I See Fire

The cold waters of the North Sea splashed against the hardwood sides

of dozens on longships as they cut their way through the waves, churning fog surrounding them, reducing the Viking and Highlander's visibility to nearly zero.

"Sound yer positions!" Stoick called from his ship, "Everyone stay within earshot!"

As the men began to sound off with their positions, Gobber hobbled over to Stoick's side.

"Listen, Stoick," Gobber spoke with a nervous tone, "Ah was overhearin' saeme o' th' men jist now an', well, saeme o' them are wonderin' whit exactly we're up tae oot here. Nae me, o' course. Ah know ye're always th' man with th' plan. But saeme, nae me, are wonderin' if there is, in fact, a plan at all an' whit it might be."

"Find the Nest and take it," Stoick growled solemnly.

"Oh, o' course," Gobber replied with a nervous chuckle, "Send them runnin'. Th' auld Viking fallback. Nice an' simple."

As Gobber spoke, Stoick turned his attention towards where Toothless was chained up on the ship's deck. Seeing Toothless beginning to stir, Stoick held up his hand and shushed Gobber to silence him. Looking closer, Stoick could see that Toothless' ears had begun to twitch as he tilted his head in different directions. With a look of understanding, Stoick moved to the back of the boat and took control over the ship's rudder. As he did, Stoick saw Toothless raise his head and look in a direction through the fog, prompting the village chief to turn the ship in the same direction. Slowly, following Toothless' directions, Stoick piloted the ship around the treacherous rocks, the other ships following along behind.

"Nowhere to hide now," Stoick said as he continued to pilot his ship through the fog and rocks.

Meanwhile,

Hiccup sighed as he stood in the arena, looking up at the shut doors holding some of the dragons in their pens. Glancing back to the center of the arena, he saw the other teens gathered not far away, most of them nervously looking at Meatlug and Boudica, who were standing off to the side with Merida and Fishlegs.

"Alright, I'm officially done waiting," Snotlout announced as he turned to Hiccup and pointed a finger at his cousin, "You're going to tell us what the Hel is going on, and you're going to tell us now."

"Okay," Hiccup agreed with a nod, placating Snotlout for the moment, "You all remember a couple of months ago when I said I shot down a Night Fury and no one believed me?"

"So you really did?" Ruff questioned, surprised.

"I did," Hiccup answered with a smirk and a nod, "I was going to kill it to show everyone, to show you guys, that I was a Viking. But I couldn't do it."

"Why nae?" Boyd questioned.

"Because I looked him in the eyes and I saw he was just as scared as I was," Hiccup explained, "I realized that there was more to dragons than what we had been led to believe. They're not just bloodthirsty monsters, they think and they feel, just like us. So I cut him loose and we ended up bonding. We learned more about dragons through that then I think any Viking has learned in a thousand years. We also learned something else."

"What's that?" Tuff asked.

"We found the Nest and we learned there was a lot more than dragons on it," Hiccup replied.

"Whit dae ye mean?" Will pushed.

"The Vendal have been living on the Nest," Hiccup explained, eliciting looks of surprise from the teens, "And sealed within the bowels of the island is the Red Death itself."

"Wait, hold on!" Snotlout shouted holding his hands up with a look of bewilderment on his face, "The Red Death? The legendary dragon that destroyed the united Viking kingdom generations ago? That Red Death?"

"Yes," Hiccup answered, "He's been trapped in the Nest this whole time. He seems to have the ability to control other dragons, which is why they're always raiding. They're bringing all the food they steal to the Nest to feed the Red Death."

"Why don't they just not?" Ruff asked, "If the thing is trapped, what would happen?"

"Then the Vendal would kill them and feed them to the Red Death instead," Hiccup elaborated.

"Wait, why are th' Vendal helpin' it?" Will questioned.

"I don't know, but for whatever reason they want to free the Red Death," Hiccup stated, a grim look on his face, "And now they can."

"How?" Boyd asked.

"It's the reason they came here," Hiccup explained, "Hilde, the old woman they took, she's the one who sealed the Red Death away in the first place. She's the only one who can unseal him."

"And now they have her," Tuff surmised grimly.

"And our parents and everyone else are sailing right into it!" Ruff exclaimed, a look of panic on her face.

"Sae, whit are we gaein' tae dae?" Will questioned, crossing his arms.

"Our best bet is to get to the Nest and stop Mor'du from releasing the Red Death," Hiccup replied determinedly.

"And how, exactly, are we going to do that?" Snotlout questioned, not liking where this conversation was going.

"We ride," Hiccup said, indicating towards where Boudica and Meatlug sat.

"You want us to ride dragons!?" Tuff exclaimed, shock.

"It's nae as hard as ye think," Merida spoke up, patting Boudica on her neck, "As long as they're willin'."

"And we can show you how to make them willing," Hiccup added with a smirk.

"Whit happens if we daenae get there in time?" Boyd asked, "Whit happens if Mor'du releases th' Red Death?"

"Then I guess we'll just have to kill him too," Hiccup said, completely serious.

There was a pause as the teens let Hiccup's words sink in before Will stepped forward, cracking his knuckles as he did.

"Sae, let me get this straight. Almost certainty o' death. Small chance o' success," Will mused before shrugging his shoulders and clapping his hands together as he smirked at Hiccup, "Whit are we waitin' fer?"

Hiccup smiled at Will as Ruff walked around in front of the young lord and looked up at him.

"You're crazy," Ruff observed, before leering at Will as she looked him up and down, "I like that."

"Oh, dae ye now?" Will questioned, leering right back at her. Before he could say anything more, Tuff walked between them, palming Will's face with his hand and pushing the Highlander back, a disgusted look on his face.

"Yeah, that's enough flirting with my sister," Tuff said prompting Ruff to roll her eyes at him as her brother turned to address Hiccup, "You were wise to seek the assistance of the world's greatest living weapon."

"Umâ€¦" Hiccup began to say, clearly confused.

"It's me," Tuff explained before he was bumped out of the way as Andra and Boyd walked up to Hiccup. Looking up at Andra, Hiccup heard the large young man mumble something to him, but not understanding a word of it, turned to Boyd for an explanation.

"He says he's in," Boyd explained, before pausing for an awkwardly long time.

"And what about you?" Hiccup asked.

"Oh aye, Ah'm in too," Boyd replied like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Are you kidding me!?" Snotlout exclaimed, looking at everyone else

like they were crazy, "You're all going along with this!?"

"Dude, what other choice do we have?" Tuff questioned.

"There's got to be some way of saving everyone without going back on what it means to be a Viking!" Snotlout ranted as he turned his ire towards Hiccup, "You know that dragons are the enemy. Viking's have known that for generations!"

"An' fer generations, Vikin's hae been wrong!" Merida spoke up, stepping forward.

"Oh, what do you know?" Snotlout rounded on Merida, waving his hand dismissively at her, "You're not one of us. You're a Highlander. An outsider. What do you know about being a Viking!?"

"Ah know plenty," Merida shot back, "Ah know 'at if it's nae really all dragons 'at are th' enemy, but ane dragon. Th' Red Death. Whit we hae right here is th' chance tae ensure 'at he ne'er escapes or kill him ance an' fer all. Are ye really gaein' tae turn yer back on defeatin' th' greatest threat Vikin's hae e'er faced?"

"That's assuming I believe anything you and him have to say," Snotlout said dismissively as he turned to leave, "Do whatever you want but leave me out of it. Like I said, princess, you don't know anything about being a Viking."

Merida watched Snotlout go for a few moments before taking a deep breath.

"_Far over th' misty mountains cauld_, " Merida sung, catching everyone's attention and causing Snotlout to stop and slowly turn to look at her, "_Tae dungeons deep an' caverns auld._"

There was a pause as Merida looked at Snotlout to make sure that he was listening.

"_We must away, ere break o' day_, " Merida continued, glancing over at Hiccup who smiled at her, "_Tae claim our long-forgotten home._"

"_The pines were roaring on the height_, " Hiccup joined, prompting Merida to smile at him, "_The winds were moaning in the night._"

"_The fire was red, it's flaming spread_, " Fishlegs sung as well, a look of surprise on his face as he noticed Meatlug and Boudica had begun to hum along with the beat, "_The trees like torches, blazed with light._"

"_The bells were ringing, in the dale_, " Astrid joined in smiling at the others as she did, "_and men looked up with faces pale._"

"_The dragon's ire, more fierce than fire_, " Ruff picked up, "_Laid low their towers and houses frail._"

"_The castle smoked beneath the moon_, " Tuff continued, "_The men, they heard the tramp of doom._"

The arena fell silent as everyone turned their attention towards

Snotlout. The young man looked hesitant for a moment before he locked eyes with Merida and sighed.

"_They fled their hall to dying fall,_" Snotlout sung, causing the others to break out in smiles, "_Beneath his feet, beneath the moon._"

"_Far over the misty mountains cold, through dungeons deep and caverns old,_" the group sung together, their voices echoing off the stone walls of the arena and harmonizing with the dragons' humming, "_We must away, ere break of day, to seek our long-forgotten home._"

There was a quiet moment as the group looked around at each other smiling. As they did, Andra bent down and whispered something into Will's ear.

"How shud Ah know?" Will rebutted, glancing at Andra and shrugging his shoulders, "Must be saeme kind o' Vikin' thin'."

"So, are you with us?" Hiccup questioned.

"You know, when you put it in the context of taking down the biggest bad that Vikings have ever known, it definitely makes me reconsider," Snotlout replied with a smirk before nodding his head, "Yeah, I'm in."

"Great," Hiccup stated smiling at his cousin before addressing the group, "Now comes the hard part."

"What's that?" Ruff asked.

"We still have three dragons, and we're going to need them on our side if we're all going to make it to the Nest," Hiccup explained, "Merida and Fishlegs have dragons on their own, now we need three of you to ride the others."

"So you need some of us to bond with these dragons?" Tuff surmised, "And you need them to do it in like, ten minutes?"

Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs all shared a look before looking back at Tuff and nodding their heads.

"Yeah, pretty much," Fishlegs relented.

"Sae, who wud like tae try first?" Merida asked.

"Me," Astrid said, raising her hand as she stepped forward.

"Alright Astrid," Hiccup said as he walked over to her side, "The thing you have to is remain calm. You can't push this."

"I figured as much," Astrid agreed with a nod.

"It seems tae help if ye've made saeme sort o' connection with th' dragon," Merida added, glancing up at Boudica as she talked, "Even if 'at connection wasnae on th' best terms."

"I think I know who to pick then," Astrid stated a look of determination on her face.

A few minutes later and Astrid was standing alone in front of one of the pen doors, the others moving to the sides to give her space. Looking over to where Fishlegs was standing near the door release levers, she gave him a nod, prompting him to pull the lever down and unseal the door in front of her. A moment later and the Timberjack came leaping through the door, its metallic wings scraping along the hard stone. Spotting Astrid, the Timberjack snarled as it approached her, coiling around the young woman.

"Easy now, Astrid," Hiccup called from the side, "You don't want to spook him!"

"Don't worry," Astrid replied with a smirk, "I think I know exactly what he wants."

As the Timberjack continued to curl around her, Astrid reached out and ran her fingers along the dragon's scales right near its wings. The action caused the Timberjack to suddenly freeze up before relaxing and falling to the ground, a pleased look on its face.

"Yeah, you like that, don't you?" Astrid cooed as if she was talking to a dog, climbing up on the Timberjack's back and began scratching it between its wings, causing the dragon to let out pleased sounds, "Yeah, I thought so. I think I'm going to call you Stormfly. You like that? Yeah, you do."

There was stunned silence as the rest of the group watched the spectacle for a few moments.

"Are you kidding me?" Snotlout asked incredulously, "It's that easy? Ah man, I'm totally going next."

"I'm not sure you just want to jump into this like that, Snotlout," Hiccup said warily, "I think Astrid had a pretty good idea of how to handle that Timberjack exactly the way she needed to."

"Relax, cuz. I got this," Snotlout replied cockily as he stepped forward while Astrid led the Timberjack to the side, "Fishlegs! Give me the Nightmare!"

Fishlegs hesitated, looking over to Hiccup for guidance.

"Well, I guess someone has to try and tame it," Hiccup relented with a sigh. Fishlegs just shrugged in reply before pulling the lever down, unsealing the pen holding the Monstrous Nightmare. A second later, the door was pushed open and the Monstrous Nightmare came stalking out, keeping low to the ground as it eyed Snotlout warily, the young man smiling broadly at the dragon.

"Hey buddy," Snotlout greeted as he walked towards the Nightmare, which continued to watch him wearily, "So, here's the deal, you and I are going to be pals now. You're going to let me ride you and basically our individual levels of awesomeness are going to combined and make us the most awesome thing on the entire planet. What do you say to that?"

The Nightmare merely looked at Snotlout for a few moments before snapping its jaws at him, forcing the young man to back pedal so that

his head was not bitten off of his shoulders. A panicked look replaced Snotlout's cocky one as he continued to run backwards from the Monstrous Nightmare, the dragon following and biting at him the whole while. As he back pedaled, Snotlout's foot caught an uneven stone in the arena floor, sending him tumbling to the ground. As Snotlout shook his head clear, he suddenly found the Nightmare standing over him, leaning down to swallow him whole. Before it could, Hiccup ran between the two, holding his hands up towards the Nightmare, which halted for a moment, snarling as it took a step away from him.

"Whoa! It's okay!" Hiccup shouted, trying to calm the Nightmare down, lowering his voice as it continued to snarl at him, "It's okay."

The Nightmare continued to snarl at Hiccup who made calming noises towards the dragon as Snotlout sat terrified on the ground. Slowly but surely, Hiccup managed to calm the dragon, holding his hand a few inches from the Nightmare's snout. Reaching down, Hiccup grabbed Snotlout's arm and pulled his cousin to his feet before he began to bring it over to the Nightmare's nose.

"Whoa, wait!" Snotlout exclaimed, still clearly scared.

"It's okay," Hiccup reassured Snotlout, using the same tone he had used to speak to the Nightmare, "It's okay."

Taking Snotlout's hand, he placed it on the Nightmare's nose, the dragon letting out a low purr as he did. Slowly, Snotlout began to stroke the dragon's nose, causing the Nightmare to purr louder. A smile crept across Snotlout's face before he began to laugh as he continued to stroke the Nightmare's nose.

"Looks like we just got off on the wrong foot," Snotlout said with a chuckle, leaning down to get a better look at the Nightmare's teeth, "Quite the set you got there. I think I'll call you Hookfang. How's that sound?"

The Nightmare grunted in reply before following as Snotlout led it to the side. Hiccup smiled as he turned his attention towards the other teens.

"So, we got one left," Hiccup surmised, "Who wants to try the Zippleback?"

"Ah think me an' th' lads will sit this oot," Will stated as Boyd and Andra nodded in agreement, "Ye lot seem tae hae a better handle on this whole dragon business than we dae."

"So I guess that leaves us," Tuff stated, turning to look at his sister.

"We could try to tame it together," Ruff suggested, "It's got two heads after all. It probably remembers us too."

"Worth a shot," Tuff agreed with a shrug before they both stepped into the center of the arena, prompting Fishlegs to unseal the Zippleback's door. The dragon came slithering out in a cloud of noxious green gas, hissing as it caught sight of the twins. The twins each took a nervous step backwards as the Zippleback's heads leaned over them with their long necks.

"Hey, big guy," Ruff greeted nervously, "You remember us?"

The head nearest Ruff created sparks with its teeth as the one near Tuff hissed as gas billowed from its mouth.

"I'll take that as a yes!" Tuff stated uneasily.

"Hey, look, we're not so different are we?" Ruff questioned, talking directly to the igniter head, before reaching up and running her thumb across the thin scar on her cheek, "See?"

The head paused for a moment, before its long serpentine tongue reached out and ran along with similar scar it had on its own cheek. Smiling, Ruff glanced over her shoulder at Tuff and the other head, who were watching them, gas slowly leaking out of the head's mouth as it watched.

"Your buddy over there seems to be as full of hot air as my brother," Ruff commented conspiratorially to the igniter head, which let out a hissing noise that sounded like a laugh.

"Hey, why don't you keep your stupid comments to yourself!" Tuff argued angrily, the gas head agreeing with a hiss, causing the young man to nod before looking up at the head in surprise, "Oh man, I think it's working."

"I can see that, moron," Ruffnut groused as she rolled her eyes before turning her attention back towards the igniter head. As she did, she noticed that the head was looking at her strangely. Looking her dead in the eye, the igniter head began to subtly rock back and forth. Ruff squinted her eyes as she noticed it as she began to subconsciously rock her head in time with the head's movement. As she watched, the head began to rock back and forth more and more, prompting Ruff to do the same, putting more of her body into the motion as it went.

"Tuff, are you seeing this?" Ruff questioned, not looking away from the swaying dragon head in front of her.

"Yeah, mine's doing the same thing," Tuff responded, a mirror image of his sister as he followed along to the gas head's movements.

"What do you think it's doing?" Ruff questioned, speeding up her movements as the igniter head increased the tempo.

"I don't know. Testing us maybe?" Tuff suggested, twisting his body to mimic the twists of the gas head's neck. As the twins continued to dance with the Zippleback, the dragon began twisting its long necks around them, forcing the twins to begin circling one another to keep with their respective head. Eventually, the twins were back to back as the Zippleback's necks completely encircled them, leaving the heads inches away from the twins' owns. Slowly, the heads leaned in closer, took a few curious sniffs of the twins before nudging them with their noses, chirping warmly as they did.

"Hey, we did it!" Tuff exclaimed happily as he reached out and pet the head in front of him.

"Yeah," Ruff agreed as her head licked her with its forked tongue, "I wonder what we should call him?"

At that moment, the gas head burped in Tuff's face, briefly engulfing his head in a cloud of noxious fumes, causing the young man to gag and cough.

"Ugh, his belches smell like barf," Tuff moaned as he tried to wave the gas away.

"You know, that's not a bad name," Ruff mused as she reached up and stroked the igniter head's chin, "How about we call them Barf and Belch?"

"Sounds good to me," Tuff replied with a chuckle.

"So that's all the dragons," Astrid observed, "Now what?"

"Now we get ready," Hiccup replied, "This is going to be the biggest fight of our lives and there's a chance we might not all make it back. We have to be prepared."

The teens all looked at each other nervously before nodding.

"Meet me in front of the temple in an hour," Hiccup stated, his face grim, "Then, we ride for the Nest."

Meanwhile,

Slowly, the group of longships made its way through the cloud of fog, the rocks beginning to grow few and far between. Toothless snorted in agitation, straining against his chains. Suddenly, a rocky island was looming in front of the longships, the boats running aground on the hard shores.

"Ready yer weapons and stay low," Stoick ordered as he left the rudder and moved towards the front of the ship. Looking up at the cliffs, Stoick spotted a dragon flit through the crevices of the cliffs.

"We're here," Stoick stated as he grinned before leaping off the side of the boat onto the rocky shore. Turning around, he saw the Vikings and Highlanders pulling their ships ashore as well. Soon, Gobber, Spitelout and Bertha stood with him along with Fergus and his three lords.

"Get our men to set up some defenses and get the siege engines prepared," Stoick said, "When we crack that mountain open, all Hel is going to break loose."

"Oh, I guarantee it," a voice called out from over the rocky shores, grabbing everyone's attention. Turning, they saw Mor'du walking towards them through the clouds of fog, his claymore in hand and an old woman thrown over his shoulder.

"Mor'du," Fergus growled as he glared at the Demon Bear.

"Funny running into you all here," Mor'du commented with a grin.

"So, looks like the boy was right," Stoick stated as he stepped forward, gripping a waraxe in his hands.

"Your son told you you'd find me here?" Mor'du questioned with a chuckle, "I'll have to talk to him about that next time I see him."

"Whit dae ye mean 'next time'?" Gobber asked, his blood running cold at the implications.

"Oh, I was just at Berk," Mor'du replied nonchalantly, shrugging the shoulder he had Hilde slung over, "Had to pick something up. Don't worry, all your children are in good health."

Mor'du laughed as he looked at the horrified faces before him.

"Or at least, they were," Mor'du amended with a sadistic grin.

"Ye bastard!" Fergus roared, shoving past the others and charging at Mor'du with his claymore drawn. Mor'du grinned as he watched Fergus approaching before batting the Bear King's attack away with his own sword, following up by backhanding the Highlander across the face, sending him sprawling.

"Now, now, Fergus. Let's not be hasty," Mor'du stated as he planted his sword into the ground and took out a large horn, "It would be rude of me not to share after all."

Taking a deep breath, Mor'du blew into his horn three times, the mournful sound echoing off the rocky crags of the Nest. As the horn fell silent, slowly the air was filled with the sounds of feet scrapping against rock and indecipherable yelling. Looking up at the cliffside, Stoick saw dozens upon dozens of Vendal come swarming out of their hidden caves, each one roaring down at the assembled Vikings and Highlanders, gnashing their teeth and waving their makeshift weapons about.

"This is why you should be careful when you knock on a stranger's door, Stoick," Mor'du said, grinning maliciously at the village chief as he pulled his black sword out of the ground and pointed it at the Viking, "You never know who might answer."

And then the cliffs were alive with swarming Vendal.

Meanwhile,

Hiccup sat in village temple before the altar of Loki. A single candle burnt on the altar, casting dancing shadows across the room. Next to the candle sat Hiccup's horned helmet and his crossbow sat next to him while his sword rested unseathed on his lap. Hiccup looked down at the sword, his anxious expression reflected back at him in the polished metal. Slowly, Hiccup lifted his eyes to the symbol carved into the wall, looking pleadingly at the twisting dragons that served as the god's sigil. Unbeknownst to him, Helga hovered near the doorway, balancing on her crutches as she bit her lip nervously.

"Oh, Misty Eye of the Mountain Below," Hiccup sang, his voice barely above a whisper, "Keep careful watch of my father's

soul_."

Hiccup gulped nervously before continuing.

"_And should the sky be filled with fire and smoke,_" Hiccup continued, his eyes never wavering from Loki's symbol, "_Keep watching over Siegfried's sons._"

Across the village, a small breeze picked up, seeming to carry Hiccup's voice across Berk as a whisper on the wind.

"_If this is to end in fire, then we shall all burn together._"

Astrid sat alone in her house, running a whetstone over the edge of her axe. Sighing she placed the whetstone down and stood up before strapping the axe to her back.

"_Watch the flames climb high into the night._"

As she moved towards the door, she paused as something caught her eye on the mantel above the fireplace. Walking over she reached up and took a woodcarving from the mantel, the dying light of the fire illuminating the image. It depicted a male warrior, seemingly short in stature with a bulbous mustachioed nose. He wore a winged helmet and was dressed in armor that looked like it belonged in ages past.

"_Calling out father, stand by and we will watch the flames burn auburn on the mountainside._"

"Lend me your strength, ancestor," Astrid whispered, a scared look on her face as she traced the woodcarving, "I need it now more than ever."

"_And if we should die tonight, then we should all die together._"

Astrid carefully put the woodcarving back before leaving her house. Making her way down the hill, she walked towards Fishlegs' home, where she saw him embracing his mother in the doorway.

"_Raise a glass of wine, for the last time._"

"You come home to me, alright?" Ribbon said, tears in her eyes as she pulled away, cupping Fishlegs' cheek.

"I will, Mom. Don't worry," Fishlegs replied, before glancing over his shoulder at Astrid as she approached, "Hey."

"Hey," Astrid greeted, a small smile on her face.

"_Calling out father, prepare as we will._"

As Astrid approached, Ribbon stepped forward and pulled the younger girl into a hug, catching Astrid off guard for a moment before she slowly returned the hug.

"Promise me you'll bring my little boy back to me," Ribbon whispered into Astrid's ear, "Promise me."

"I promise," Astrid replied before pulling away and turning towards Fishlegs, "We should get going."

"Right," Fishlegs replied with a nod as he picked up his warhammer and rested it on his shoulder.

"You both be safe, okay?" Ribbon asked, tears welling up in her eyes.

"We will," Fishlegs reassured her before they both turned and walked down towards the temple.

"_Watch the flames burn auburn on the mountainside._"

Outside the temple, Astrid and Fishlegs found Snotlout and the twins waiting with the dragons. As they approached, they saw Ruff holding her knife up to one of the Zippleback head's, which ran its tongue along the blade.

"_Desolation comes upon the sky_."

"Ruff, what are you doing?" Astrid questioned, as she and Fishlegs stopped in front of the dragon.

"I know firsthand that Zippleback venom hits like a ton of rocks," Ruff explained as she sheathed her knife, "Should be helpful."

"We'll need all the help we can get," Snotlout stated, a nervous look on his face.

"Where are the Highlanders?" Fishlegs asked.

"They were in the Great Hall getting ready," Tuffnut spoke up, "They'll probably be out soon."

"_Now I see fire, inside the mountain_."

Inside the Great Hall, Merida sat on one of the tables as her mother stood behind her, pulling her long, curly hair back and forming multiple braids out of it.

"Are ye sure about this, Ma?" Merida questioned, hissing a bit as her mother pulled on another strand of hair, "Ye know 'at ma hair daesnae like tae be braided."

"Ah know, but ye daenae want this getting' in yer eyes," Elinor said, sounding like she was desperately trying to keep her voice even, "In th' middle o' a battle who knows whit cud happen an' if yer hair got in th' way thenâ€¦then saemethin' cudâ€¦"

"_I see fire, burning the trees._"

As Elinor's voice hitched, Merida reached up and grasped her mother's hand before turning to look at her. Elinor averted her eyes as a few tears streamed down her face.

"Ah know ye're scared, Ma," Merida said, as she held her mother's hand in her own, a stray strand of hair falling across her face, "Ah

am too. But if th' others an' Ah daenae dae thisâ€|"

"_I see fire, hollowing souls._"

"Ah know," Elinor replied as she wiped the tears away with her free hand, "Ah hae th' upmost faith in ye, Merida. Ah'm jist nae sure 'at it's enough."

"_I see fire, blood in the breeze._"

"It's gaein' tae hae tae be," Merida replied, before turning back around, prompting Elinor to resume braiding her hair.

"_And I hope that you'll remember me._"

After a few more minutes, Elinor was done, having taken a dozen braids and woven them together at the back of Merida's head before wrapping the green cloth around it to hold any stray hairs in place. As she stepped away, Merida saw her brothers approaching them, one carrying a jar while the other two carried a sword between them.

"_Oh, should my people fall, then surely I'll do the same._"

"We found this," one of the boys said as they handed Dragonsbane to Merida, "We thought ye might need it."

"Thank ye," Merida said with a smile as she reached out and took the sword, sliding the blade out a few inches to examine it before sliding it back in and strapping it to her back.

"_Confined in mountain halls, we got too close to the flame._"

"We also found this, Ma," the third brother said as they handed the jar to Elinor, "Is 'at whit ye were lookin' fer?"

"Indeed, sweet ane," Elinor replied, patting the boy on the head.

"Whit's 'at?" Merida questioned.

"Nae true Highlander can gae tae war withoot war paint," Elinor explained, causing Merida to smile at her.

"_Calling out father, hold fast and we will watch the flames burn auburn on the mountainside._"

Elinor took a few minutes to paint a pattern on Merida's face. She drew spiral patterns on Merida's cheeks and mirror hook-like designs on her forehead. She finished with a single stripe on Merida's chin and a line of small, interlocking circles under her daughter's eyes and across the bridge of her nose.

"There," Elinor stated as she stepped away, "Now ye really are a little Boudica. Though Ah suppose Ah cannae call ye little anymore."

"Ah'll always be yer little girl, Ma," Merida stated, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around her mother, who quickly returned her hug as the triplets ran up and wrapped their arms around the two

women's legs.

"_Desolation comes upon the sky._"

"Ye come back tae me," Elinor whispered to Merida.

"Ye know Ah will," Merida replied as she pulled away and turned to look at Will, Andra and Boyd.

"_Now I see fire, inside the mountain._"

"Alright, lads" Merida said, holding her the jar of paint up towards the three boys, "Ye heard th' lady."

"_I see fire, burning the trees._"

A few minutes later, Merida led the way out of the Great Hall, the three young lords following. Will had completely covered one side of his face with the blue war paint, dividing his face in two along his nose. Boyd painted three lines running diagonally across his face, looking almost like a large animal had scratched him. Andra had painted lines under his eyes and a cross pattern on his forehead and the bridge of his nose.

"_I see fire, hollowing souls._"

They made their way down to the temple, where they found the others waiting. Looking up, Astrid and Fishlegs smiled as they approached.

"Hey, Princess," Astrid greeted with a smirk, "Looking good."

"She's not the only one," Ruff stated, smiling as she looked Will over.

"Oh please," Tuff groaned, rolling his eyes.

"_I see fire, blood in the breeze._"

"Where's Hiccup?" Merida asked, looking around at the others.

"He must still be in the temple," Fishlegs replied.

"Didn't know Hiccup was the praying type," Snotlout observed.

"Nae in th' way ye probably think," Merida replied as she looked at the temple built into the side of the cliffs.

"_And I hope that you'll remember me._"

Waddling down the hall of the temple, Gothi came to the entrance of the room holding the shrine to Loki.

"Hiccup," she spoke up, catching the young man's attention, causing him to look over his shoulder at Gothi, "It's time, my boy. Your friends are waiting."

Hiccup nodded in reply turning and looking back at his reflection in Bemuhén's blade, his look of anxiety replaced with one of determination.

"_And if the night is burning, I will cover my eyes,_" Hiccup continued to sing as he slipped Bemuhén into the scabbard on his back.

"_For if the dark returns then my people will die,_" Hiccup sang as he picked up the small quiver that held the arrows to his crossbow and took one out. Taking a sniff, he smelt the black power held within before putting it back in the quiver before strapping it to his belt.

"_And as the sky's falling down, it crashed into this lonely town,_" Hiccup sang as he strapped his crossbow to the other side of his belt.

"_And with that shadow upon the ground,_" Hiccup continued as he stood up and picked his helmet up by the horns, putting it on his head before looking up at Loki's sigil, "_I hear my people screaming out!_"

"_Now I see fire, inside the mountain!_" Hiccup called as he turned and began to walk away, not noticing as the fire of the candle suddenly exploded outwards, briefly becoming a fireball the size of a man, the light causing Hiccup to cast a large, horned shadow. Helga and Gothi's eyes went wide in surprise and awe as Hiccup walked past them, undaunted.

"_I see fire, burning the trees!_" Hiccup continued as he made his way down the long hall of altars, the torches illuminating the way flaring brightly behind him.

"_And I see fire, hollowing souls!_" Hiccup sang as he approached the large doors leading outside, oblivious as the flames leapt from their torches as danced behind him, swirling together into an inferno that followed in his wake.

"_I see fire, blood in the breeze!_" Hiccup sang as he came to the door and leaned against it, resting his hands against the hard wood of the door. Behind him, the fire followed, a tendril reaching out towards him before all at once the fire retreated, returning to the torches it had come from. Slowly, Hiccup looked over his shoulder, back to where Loki's shrine was.

"_And I hope that you'll remember me,_" Hiccup finished, his voice once again whisper quiet before he looked forward again and pushed the doors open, stepping outside.

Helga stared for a few moments at the spot Hiccup had been standing, almost hyperventilating as she tried to process what she had just witnessed.

"Elder!" Helga exclaimed, finally finding her voice again as she turned towards Gothi, "Elder, what does it mean!?"

"It means, for good or for ill," Gothi explained, her eyes wide as she watched Hiccup descend from the temple, "The God of Fire walks with Hiccup."

As Hiccup descended from the temple, he found the others waiting for him. Merida stepped forward, smiling at Hiccup as he approached.

"Ye know, Hic," Merida commented, grinning flirtatiously at him, "Ye make quite th' dashing warrior."

"And you make a beautiful huntress, Mer," Hiccup replied, before cupping Merida's chin and kissing her.

"Whit was 'at fer?" Merida asked, pulling away as she blushed.

"We might not have a lot of those left," Hiccup answered, "Have to make them count."

In response, Merida grabbed the sides of Hiccup's head and pulled him in for another kiss.

"Alright, this is romantic and everything, but I feel like we better get going," Astrid spoke up, prompting Merida and Hiccup to pull apart.

"Sae, whit's th' plan, lad?" Will questioned.

"We'll have to pair up to get there," Hiccup explained, "I'll ride with Merida. Will, you ride with the twins. Andra can ride with Astrid and Boyd can hitch a ride with Snotlout. Sound good?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Once we get to the Nest, we have to find Hilde and stop whatever Mor'du is planning," Hiccup continued, "We take him down for good."

"And the Red Death?" Snotlout asked.

"If we can keep Hilde from unsealing him, then we can leave him to starve," Hiccup replied, "And if he is released, we'll just have to take him down the hard way. Any more questions?"

The others were quiet, determined looks on their faces as they looked back at Hiccup.

"Alright then," Hiccup stated with a nod, "Let's ride."

A/N: So I've had this chapter planned out for months now, I hope you guys enjoy how it turned out. Also secret bonus points to whoever can guess who Astrid's ancestor is supposed to be. Hint: it's not a character from either Brave or HTTYD. As always feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

36. Sins of the Father

Chapter 36: Sins of the Father

The sounds of shouting and clashing weapons echoed across the desolate grounds of the Nest. The Vikings and Highlanders fought tooth and nail with the Vendal each side quickly losing men in the melee, the dead beginning to litter the rocky shore. Roaring in fury, Stoick batted one of the Vendal aside with his axe before spinning around and slamming his shield into another barbarian, knocking him

off his feet and flipping him through the air. Sensing another person behind him, Stoick spun around to attack, only to find a bloodied Fergus. Quickly halting his attack, Stoick lowered his axe as Fergus lowered his sword.

"Where is he!?" Fergus shouted over the sounds of battle that surrounded.

"Where's who?" Stoick questioned in confusion.

"Mor'du!" Fergus exclaimed, a wild look in his eye. As he did, there came a loud scream as a Viking went flying overhead before he landed in a heap on the ground behind Fergus and Stoick. Looking in the direction the man had come from, the two men saw Mor'du looming large over the other combatants, holding the old woman to his shoulder with one hand and swinging his claymore around with another. Laughing manically, Mor'du swept his sword in front of him, knocking three other men back.

"I think I found him," Stoick stated before he and Fergus made their way towards Mor'du, their weapons at the ready. Pushing their way through the crowd, Stoick and Fergus moved to attack Mor'du as the Demon Bear turned to face them.

"There you two are!" Mor'du exclaimed with a laugh as he pointed his sword at them, "I was wondering where you two had run off to!"

"Who's the old woman, Mor'du?" Stoick demanded.

"That is none of your business," Mor'du replied nonchalantly, "But you'll find out soon. In fact, I don't have time to play around with the two of you. I have things that I need to take care of."

"Ye're nae gaein' anywhere!" Fergus shouted before leaping forward and slashing at Mor'du with his sword. Mor'du's grin widened as he parried the blow with his own sword, pushing Fergus' to the side and spinning around him as the Bear King stumbled back. As Mor'du turned around, he came face to face with Stoick as the chief lifted his axe to attack him. Lifting his sword, Mor'du blocked Stoick's axe swing before twisting the axe to the side, allowing the Demon Bear to step forward and strike the chief hard across the face with his free hand, sending the man spinning to the ground. Mor'du grinned down at Stoick before spinning around and backhanding Fergus as well as the Bear King moved to attack him from behind.

"Like I said, boys," Mor'du said with a helpless shrug as he looked down at the two men trying to pick themselves up off the ground, "We'll have to save this for another time."

With that, Mor'du turned away and began wading through the melee, heading towards the Nest. Fergus and Stoick moved to follow him but were stopped as a mob of Vandal ran in front of them, blocking their path.

Entering one of the tunnels, Mor'du wormed his way down into the depths of the Nest, Hilde still hoisted over his shoulder. As he reached the deepest part of the Nest, Mor'du entered a tunnel that was completely covered in runes, all of which began to glow red as he walked by them. As he reached the end of the tunnel, he dropped Hilde

onto the ground with a thud, causing the old woman to groan in pain. Slowly opening her eyes, Hilde blinked them clear as she pushed herself up, a look of fear on her face as she found Mor'du looming over her.

"Well, Mother," Mor'du stated, "Here we are at last. It's been a long time since you were here, right?"

"Not nearly long enough," Hilde replied as she pushed herself to her feet.

"You know what I need you to do, Mother," Mor'du stated.

"And you know zat I nefer vill," Hilde answered, narrowing her eyes at her son.

"I've learned to be very persuasive," Mor'du threatened, taking a step towards Hilde.

"I'm stubborn," Hilde replied, her glare unwavering.

"I know," Mor'du replied neutrally before lashing out with a backhand, the force of the blow knocking Hilde off her feet and slamming her against one of the stone walls, "Let's get started then."

Picking her up, Mor'du slammed Hilde against the stone wall, growling in her face. As he did, a thin trail of blood oozed from the back of Hilde's head. Watching it, Mor'du saw the blood come in contact with one of the runes, which, to his shock, caused the rune to fizzle before fading away.

"You crafty old hag," Mor'du whispered as a grin slowly spread across his features, "You used blood magic. The solution has been staring me in the face this entire time."

"It doesn't matter," Hilde replied, "I vill die before you get enough of my blood to release all zee runes."

"That's true, you are such a slight thing," Mor'du agreed as he tossed her aside, leaving the old woman crumpled on the form, "But I think you've forgotten one thing. Your blood is my blood, and I have so much more than you."

"It's not just my blood in your veins," Hilde coughed, "Zee runes vill burn you. You're not shtrong enough."

"Oh Mother," Mor'du sighed as he took his sword and sliced the palm of his hand open, dark blood oozing out of the wound, "I would have thought you knew better than to underestimate me."

With that, Mor'du slammed his palm against one of the runes. There was a sizzling sound as steam rose from Mor'du's hand, causing him to hiss in pain. After a moment, he took his hand away, revealing that the rune had disappeared, leaving his blood smeared on the bare rock.

"I've waited a long time for this moment," Mor'du said to himself more than Hilde, "I'm going to enjoy it."

_Meanwhile, _

Fergus fought against a group of Vandal, slashing at them with his claymore. One jumped onto his back, trying to force Fergus down. Fergus struggled with the man for a few moments, trying to pull him off while the other Vandal rushed towards him. Grabbing hold of the man on his back, Fergus threw him at the others, knocking all the Vandal back. Spinning his sword, Fergus turned to face the Vandal.

Before the savages could attack though, a flurry of spines came flying out of the sky, striking the Vandal and knocking a number of them to the ground. Looking up to the sky, Fergus saw Boudica come swooping down, Merida and Hiccup riding on her back. As Boudica landed, she shot a tongue of fire at a group of Vandal, lighting a number of them on fire and forcing others back. Drawing an arrow from her quiver, Merida notched it onto her bow and fired it, striking a Vandal in the chest and knocking him to the ground.

"Merida?" Fergus stated in shock, "Hiccup? What are ye two daein' here?"

"We cudnae sit by and do nothing, Da," Merida stated as she adjusted her seat on Boudica's back, "We knew that you were in over your head, and we had to help, even if you and Stoick weren't willing to listen."

"Sae, th' two o' ye flew oot here on th' back o' a dragon?" Fergus questioned, dumbfounded.

"Not quite," Hiccup replied, indicating upwards, drawing Fergus' eyes towards the sky. As he looked up, Fergus saw four more dragons come swooping down. Whooping with excitement, Fishlegs and Meatlug buzzed over the crowd, the Gronckle spitting a fireball down at the crowd of Vandal, the blast exploding as it hit the ground, sending a number of the savages flying through the air. As Meatlug flew over the crowd, Fishlegs leaned down and swung his hammer at a Vandal, hitting the savage hard in the face, sending the man flipping through the air as Fishlegs and Meatlug flew back into the sky. Looking down, Fishlegs caught sight of his father looking up at him from the ground, a look of shock and awe on his face.

"Fishlegs?" Fishguts questioned, but was distracted as another Vandal moved to attack him.

At the same time, Astrid and Andra came flying down on the back of Stormfly. The Timberjack lowered his wings as he soared above the battle, slicing through the horde of Vandal with his razor sharp wings, knocking the savages into the air or sending them spinning to the ground. Roaring, Stormfly let out a blast of fire, scorching another group of Vandal as he flew over them. As Astrid steered Stormfly, Andra sat behind her, gripping the dragon's spines to keep himself steady as he scanned the melee below. Noticing something, he shook Andra's shoulder to get her attention.

"What is it?" Astrid questioned as she looked over her shoulder at Andra. Andra mumbled something, but Astrid could only look at him in confusion as the whistling wind carried his words away. Growing frustrated, he pointed towards a point in the fight. Following his indication, Astrid saw Lord MacGuffin and his men were completely

surrounded.

"Is that your dad?" Astrid questioned, earning a nod from Andra, "Okay, hold on!"

Pulling on the side of Stormfly's head, Astrid guided the Timberjack over towards where Lord MacGuffin and his men were. Lifting one of his javelins, Andra pointed it down at the ground before hurling it, hitting a Vandal just as he was leaping at Andra's father. The force of the blow knocked the Vandal out of the air and onto the ground, causing Lord MacGuffin to look up at the approaching dragon. Swooping down, Stormfly crashed into the group of Vandal while wrapping his serpentine body around the group of Highlanders. Rearing up, Stormfly fired a long stream of fire at the Vandal, forcing them to scatter as some of them were engulfed by the flames.

"Andra!?" Lord MacGuffin questioned as his son slid off of Stormfly's back, "Whit are ye daein' here!?"

"Saving your hide, it looks like!" Astrid called down as Stormfly roared at the cowering Vandal warriors.

"Whit's gaein' on here, lad?" Lord MacGuin asked his son. Andra responded rapidly in a way that only his father seemed to be able to understand. After a moment, his father nodded before reaching down and pulling Andra's javelin out of the Vandal's body and handing it back to his son.

"Good tae hae ye with us, son," Lord MacGuffin stated, before turning his attention to Astrid, "Ye too, lass. Ye an' yerâ€¦friend."

"Don't worry about it," Astrid replied before signaling Stormfly to take off, "Now, if you guys are okay here, me and Stormfly are going to take off."

Andra replied with a nod and a wave, prompting Stormfly to take off again, leaving a large cloud of dust in his wake.

At the same time, Ruff and Tuff were flying Barf and Belch over the battle, the twins sitting on the dragon's two necks while Will hung onto a spine on the Zippleback's back. His sword drawn, Will let a whoop of excitement as the wind whipped past.

"Why daenae we light these bastards up!?" Will questioned, pointing at the Vandal below them with his sword.

"No good!" Tuff shouted back over the wind, "The Zippleback has to build up a big cloud of gas to blow up! We won't get the chance!"

"How about a snatch an' grab then, ye know!?" Will asked.

"I like the way you think!" Ruff called back to him, before she and her brother urged Barf and Belch to fly lower. Swooping over the Vandal, Barf and Belch reached out, grabbing hold of groups of Vandal with their claws and tails. Striking out like cobras, Barf and Belch grabbed a few more with their teeth before swooping back into the air. Once they had flown high enough, the Zippleback released all the Vandal it was carrying, sending the Vandal scattering before they all crashed to the ground.

"Nicely done!" Will called, before he noticed something in the crowd, "Brin' us over there!"

"What's other there!?" Ruff questioned.

"Ma Da!" Will replied as Barf and Belch flew low over a group of Highlanders, prompting Will to edge towards the side of the Zippleback, "Thanks! This is where Ah get off!"

With that, Will hopped off the Zippleback's back. As he fell a short distance, Will dropped onto an unaware Vendal, driving his sword into the savage's chest as he crushed the man beneath him. Standing up, Will quickly pulled his sword out of the Vendal's body before spinning around and slashing another barbarian across the chest. As a Vendal charged at him, Will parried the savage's attack before twisting the man's club out of the way and stabbed him in the stomach. Pulling his sword out, Will turned and found his father approaching him.

"Will!" Lord Macintosh exclaimed with surprise.

"Hey Da," Will greeted nonchalantly with a smirk.

"'At was a Hel o' an entrance, son!" Lord Macintosh laughed.

"Ah had saeme help," Will stated as he pointed upwards, indicating to Barf and Belch as they swooped overhead again, snatching up some more Vendal before dropping them, sending the barbarian's screaming through the air.

Meanwhile, Snotlout and Boyd shot over the battle on Hookfang's back, the Nightmare shooting a large blast of flames down at the Vendal horde, scorching the savages as they shot by overhead.

"Alright!" Snotlout shouted excitedly, holding onto Hookfang's long horns to keep himself seated, "This is awesome! Don't you think, man!?"

As Snotlout looked back to better address Boyd, he saw the young lord stand up and hop off of Hookfang's back, sending him plummeting towards the battle below.

"Holy crap!" Snotlout exclaimed in shock, looking down to see if he could catch a glimpse of Boyd below, "That dude's crazy! Holy crap!"

As Boyd fell, he landed hard on a Vendal below him, knocking them both to the ground. Boyd recovered first and slammed his shield against the back of the Vendal's head, ensuring that the man stayed down. As Boyd straightened up, he was blindsided by another Vendal, who tackled him back to the ground. As the two wrestled, the Vendal ended up on top, snarling down at Boyd as he tried to bite the young lord, the Highlander holding him back with his hands. Pulling his fist back, Boyd punched the Vendal hard in the face, stunning the barbarian for a moment. With his opponent dazed, Boyd turned the man's head to the side before biting down hard on the Vendal's neck. The Vendal screamed in pain as blood poured out of the wound, allowing Boyd to push the savage off of him and stand up, the other man's blood running down his chin. As the Vendal writhed in pain on

the ground, Boyd spit out a gob of blood before throwing his hands into the air and shouting in victory. As Hookfang flew overhead, Snotlout sat up straight and shook his head, a frightened look in his eyes.

"Yep," Snotlout said to himself, "Definitely crazy."

Down on the ground, Fergus turned to face Hiccup and Merida once again.

"Well, Ah hae tae hand it tae ye two," he stated with a grin, "A handful o' dragons are certainly helpful when they're on yer side."

"Ah tried tae tell ye," Merida replied with a laugh before becoming serious again, "Da, hae ye see Mor'du?"

"Ah hae," Fergus replied gravely, "He had saeme auld woman with him. Ye wudnae know anythin' aboot 'at, wud ye?"

"We'd know a lot about it, in fact," Hiccup replied, "Is Toothless still on my father's ship?"

"He is," Fergus nodded, "Another dragon wudnae hurt, Ah suppose."

"Agreed," Hiccup replied with a nod, before a nervous look crossed his face, "My dadâ€¦is heâ€¦"

"He was alright th' last time Ah saw him nae long ago, lad," Fergus reassured the young man, "Now th' two o' ye gae dae whit needs daein'. Ah daenae know whit's gaein' on, but Ah can tell ye lot dae."

"Stay safe, Da," Merida said as she urged Boudica into the air.

"Ye know me!" Fergus called after them.

"Exactly!" Merida replied as they flew towards the ships, eliciting a laugh from Fergus before he turned and rejoined the battle.

As they flew towards the ships, Hiccup scanned the decks for any signs of Toothless.

"There he is!" Hiccup exclaimed, pointing down towards the ship that Toothless was chained to. Flying in low, Merida hovered Boudica over the ship, allowing Hiccup to slide off the Nadder's side and fall a short distance to the deck below.

"Go find Fishlegs!" Hiccup called up to Merida, earning a nod from the Highlander girl before she turned Boudica and flew off. Unsheathing his sword, Hiccup moved over towards Toothless, who was pulling eagerly at his bonds.

"Don't worry, bud, I've got you," Hiccup reassured Toothless before slashing at the chains that bound the dragon, Bemuhlen easily cutting through the iron chains. As Hiccup slashed through the lock of the yoke around Toothless' neck, the Night Fury happily threw it off before giving the young man a friendly lick.

"It's good to see you too," Hiccup said with a laugh as he pulled himself onto Toothless' back and strapping himself into the saddle, "Come on, let's go find the others."

With that, Toothless shot into the air, soaring above the battle raging below. Looking around, Hiccup found the others hovering above the battle on their dragons. The group turned to him as he flew over.

"What's the plan now?" Astrid asked.

"We have to stop Mor'du from completing whatever he's planning," Hiccup explained, "We know he's brought Hilde down into the tunnels. It's too small for us all to fit in their though. Astrid, Snotlout, Ruff and Tuff, you guys stay out here and help with that battle. Merida, Fishlegs and I will go after Mor'du."

"You sure that's a good idea?" Snotlout questioned.

"It's the best idea I've got," Hiccup admitted.

"Stay safe," Astrid said, a worried look on her face.

"As safe as we can," Fishlegs replied before he, Hiccup and Merida flew down towards one the entrances into the Nest.

"Mor'du will be somewhere in the deepest part of the Nest," Hiccup said as they landed and dismounted their dragons.

"Yeah, but where?" Fishlegs questioned.

"Guys," Merida spoke up, catching the others' attention before nodding towards one of the tunnels, "Look."

Following Merida's gaze, Hiccup and Fishlegs saw a wisp in the tunnel, beckoning them to follow it.

"I guess that answers that question," Fishlegs replied before the three of them moved to follow the wisp, their dragons moving to follow them. As they did, Hiccup turned towards the dragons.

"Remember guys, the tunnels aren't big enough for you," Hiccup explained, "You head to the big chamber. We'll meet up with you."

Toothless groaned and nudged Hiccup with his nose, prompting the young man to smile and pat the Night Fury on the head.

"I'll see you soon, bud," Hiccup stated before he, Merida and Fishlegs followed the wisp into the tunnels. The three dragons watched them leave before Toothless turned to them and barked, prompting them to follow him down the larger tunnel.

As the trio followed the wisp, it led them deeper and deeper into the Nest, disappearing every time they drew close and reappearing a few feet in front of them. Eventually, they turned a corner and found themselves in a tunnel deep underground. Looking down the tunnel, they found Hilde laying on the floor at the other end.

"Hilde!" Merida exclaimed as the three of them ran over to the old woman. Kneeling down, Merida scooped up Hilde's head and raised it, pausing to look at the palm of her hand, gasping as she found it covered in blood. Hilde coughed in pain as her eyes fluttered open looking up at the three teens' worried faces.

"I knew you'd all find me," she said weakly with a small smile.

"We had a little help," Hiccup admitted, taking Hilde's hand in his and cupping it with his other hand.

"I'm sure you did," Hilde replied.

"We're here tae save ye," Merida said, biting her lip anxiously.

"Oh, Jaeger," Hilde said with a small shake of her head, "You vere nefer going to safe me. You can only safe yourselves."

"What do you mean?" Hiccup asked in confusion.

"Mor'duâ€|my son," Hilde said weakly, "He knowsâ€|he knows how to release it."

"How?" Merida questioned.

"He is of my blood," Hilde explained.

A thoughtful look passed over Fishlegs' face before he walked to one of the walls and ran his finger along it, coming back with a blackish gunk.

"What is it?" Merida questioned.

"Blood," Fishlegs said before wiping the blood on his pants, "The runes must be some kind of blood magic."

"Only yer blood can unseal th' runes," Merida surmised, looking down at Hilde.

"And Mor'du has your blood," Hiccup added, "He's using it to unseal the runes."

"We have tae stop him!" Merida exclaimed.

"No," Hilde argued weakly, "It's too late. Far too late."

"Then what do we do?" Hiccup questioned.

"You must put an end to zis," Hilde answered, "You must put an end to zee both of zem."

"How?" Merida questioned.

"You have all zee pieces," Hilde explained, "All zee pieces except one."

"What one's that?" Fishlegs asked.

"I don't hafe much time," Hilde said weakly, coughing as she spoke,

"I feel so weak."

"Nae," Merida pleaded, her eyes watering, "Daenae gae. We're here tae save ye."

"No one can cheat death forefer, Jaeger," Hilde replied, "Vee all hafe our time. I just vish it vasn't so soon. You hafe the sense, Jaeger. Just like me. There is so much I could hafe taught you."

"Ye still can," Merida said, tears leaking down her face, "Ye jist hae tae hold on."

"I've been holding on for so long," Hilde answered, "I'm tired now. So tired. I just vant to rest. Rest and be with my Siegfried."

"Your Siegfried?" Fishlegs questioned, "What do you mean?"

"You're a smart boy, Leser," Hilde replied, "Such a smart boy. Surely you can put it togezer."

Fishlegs thought for a moment, before a look of realization crossed his face.

"Hilde," Fishlegs stated, "That's short for Brunhilde, isn't it?"

"Such a smart boy," Hilde repeated with a small smile.

"That's not possible," Hiccup said, a look of shock on his face.

"Why?" Merida questioned, confused, "Why isnae it possible?"

"Brunhilde was the wife of Siegfried the Great," Fishlegs explained, "Hiccups four times great grandfather."

"Daes 'at meanâ€|" Merida began to question before she trailed off.

"Hilde," Hiccup said softly, "Are you my grandmother?"

"Four times great grandmozer," Hilde corrected with a smile.

"Sun above," Merida whispered in shock.

"You've known this whole time?" Hiccup questioned.

"Of course," Hilde replied nonchalantly, "Vhat kind of grandmozer would I be if I didn't?"

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" Hiccup demanded.

"Would it hafe made any difference?" Hilde questioned in return.

"Yeah, a little," Hiccup argued.

Hilde chuckled at the reply before weakly raising her hand and cupping Hiccup's face.

"You look just like him, you know," Hilde commented.

"Who?" Hiccup question in confusion.

"Zee first Hiccup," Hilde explained, "You look just like him."

Hiccup said nothing but smiled sadly at Hilde as he reached up and placed his hand on top of hers as the old woman coughed painfully.

"Iâ€¦I don't hafe much time," Hilde wheezed

"Hilde," Fishlegs said, drawing the old woman's attention to him, "What was the last thing you needed to tell us?"

"Mor'du," she said painfully, "He'sâ€¦he's not like ozer men."

"We know that," Hiccup replied, "But in what way?"

"My bloodâ€¦is not zee only bloodâ€¦in his veins," Hilde explained weakly, "I zoughtâ€¦I zought his fazer's blood vould shtop himâ€¦but he's too shtrongâ€¦too shtrong."

"Sae it has saemethin' tae dae with his father?" Merida questioned, "Who's Mor'du's father?"

"Heâ€¦He kept meâ€¦" Hilde said weakly, her eyes beginning to flutter close, "He was supposed to kill meâ€¦but he kept me instead."

"Who?" Hiccup pressed, squeezing Hilde's hand between his, "Who kept you? Mor'du's father?"

Hilde didn't reply as her eyes fluttered closed.

"Hilde!" Hiccup exclaimed, "Grandmother!"

Hilde suddenly gasped for air as her eyes flew open and she grabbed hold of Hiccup's tunic and pulled him closer.

"Bone may turn to stone and flesh may become steel," Hilde rambled deliriously, "But zee mind is soft and veak and eyes do not freeze."

"Hilde, I-I don't understand!" Hiccup said as the old woman let go of his shirt and slumped back into Merida's arms.

"Drachen gorben," Hilde muttered, her eyes fluttering close again, "Drachenâ€¦gorbenâ€¦"

With that, Hilde let out a sigh and went limp in Merida's arms.

"Hilde?" Merida whispered, tears falling down her cheeks, "Hilde?"

Receiving no answer, Merida lowered her head until her forehead touched Hilde's as she began to cry. Hiccup raised Hilde's hand up and placed it against his forehead, shutting his eyes as tears began

to fall down his cheeks. Fishlegs covered his face with his hands before dragging them across his features and then through his hair.

"Fishlegs," Hiccup spoke up, his eyes still closed, "What did she say?"

"Huh?" Fishlegs questioned, caught off guard by the question.

"Those words, they were Old Norse," Hiccup explained as he turned and looked at Fishlegs, "What did she say?"

Nodding in understanding, Fishlegs took a moment to think about Hilde's last words. Suddenly, realization struck him and his blood ran cold.

"Oh gods no," Fishlegs whispered as his face went pale, "No, it can't be."

"What?" Hiccup questioned, standing up and turning to face Fishlegs, "What is it?"

"In the old legends they said the Red Death had a wife," Fishlegs explained, "A human wife."

"What are you getting at Fish?" Hiccup questioned.

"The legends say that Siegfried took something from the Red Death when he defeated it," Fishlegs went on, "That's why the Red Death came back. He wanted what Siegfried had stolen from him."

"So?" Hiccup asked, still not following.

"What if it wasn't something Siegfried took?" Fishlegs elaborated, "What if it was someone?"

"Fishlegs, what are you going on about?" Hiccup pushed.

"There's a very old story it says that it doesn't explain how but it says possibly through magic" Fishlegs rambled, "It said a human and a dragon together they could"

"They could what, Fishlegs!?" Hiccup shouted, growing increasingly agitated.

"Hiccup, drachen geboren," Fishlegs whispered, a frightened look in his eyes, "It means dragon born."

Hiccup went quiet as his eyes went wide with understanding. He was about to say something but was interrupted by a monstrous roar that echoed from the large chamber at the end of the tunnel. Suddenly, the very walls of the mountain began to shake and pieces of the ceiling began to break away, crashing around the three teens.

"He's loose," Hiccup said frightfully, "The Red Death is loose."

"Whit dae we dae?" Merida questioned, looking up from Hilde's body.

Reaching down, Hiccup grabbed Merida's hand and pulled her to her feet.

"Run," Hiccup whispered before the whole tunnel began to shake. Turning around Hiccup took off towards the other end of the tunnel, pulling Merida behind him as Fishlegs raced after them. Soon enough, Merida began running on her own and the three teens ran through the winding tunnels as the stone walls began to collapse around them.

"How do we get out!?" Fishlegs exclaimed as rock rained down around them.

"Look!" Merida exclaimed, pointing towards a wisp that had appeared in the distance, beckoning them towards it, "This way!"

Following the wisp, the three teens raced through the tunnels as they collapsed around them, heading ever upwards. Exiting one of the tunnels, the trio found themselves in a large crevice which dozens upon dozens were flying through in a panic, heading for the exit at the other end. Hearing a loud cracking noise, Fishlegs looked over his shoulder and saw that the entire mountain was collapsing in on itself and a huge wall of rock was falling towards them.

"We're not going to make it!" Fishlegs shouted in dismay.

Suddenly, a loud barking sound caught their attention. Looking towards the source, the teens saw Toothless, Boudica and Meatlug running along a ledge below them, looking up at the trio.

"We're going to have to jump!" Hiccup shouted as he ran towards the edge of the ledge they were running along. Looking back, Hiccup could see the wall of stone crashing to the ground, kicking up a giant cloud of dust and debris that came charging right towards them.

"Jump!" Hiccup exclaimed prompting the three teens to leap off the ledge. For a few frightening moments they plummeted helplessly through the air before their falls were interrupted by the backs of their dragons. Hiccup quickly locked himself in as Merida and Fishlegs grasped the backs of their dragons tightly before all three of them urged the dragons to leap off the ledge and go racing through the air along with the flock of other dragons. Looking back, Hiccup saw the cloud of debris racing towards them, rapidly gaining ground on the teens and their dragons.

"Faster!" Hiccup urged, "Come on! Faster!"

Just as the three reached the exit of the mountain, the dust cloud exploded behind them as it reached the end of the crevice, the shockwave sending the trio tumbling through the air with their dragons. Hiccup grunted as Toothless landed on the rocky shore, skidding through the smooth stones. Shaking his head clear, he looked over and saw Merida get thrown off Boudica's back as the Nadder crashed to the ground. Merida tumbled end over end across the stone beach before landing in a seating position a short distance from her dragon.

"You okay, Mer!?" Hiccup called out to her.

"Aye, Ah think so!" Merida called back, holding her head and shaking it clear.

"I'm okay!" Fishlegs exclaimed as Meatlug crashed onto its head and skidded across the shore on its face, "I'm okay!"

Suddenly, Fishlegs weight on the front of Meatlug caused the Gronckle to topple forward, knocking the young man off its back and sending him crashing face first against the ground while the dragon flipped over on top of him, laying on its back.

"Less okay," Fishlegs muffled voice said from under the dragon.

Hiccup smirked a little before his attention was brought back to the mountain as the whole landmass began to shake. As Hiccup watched, the top of the mountain cracked and broke apart, sending avalanches of rocks pouring down the mountainside. A moment later, the gigantic head of the Red Death emerged from the cloud of dust and debris, roaring triumphantly at the sky as it shot an inferno of flames into the air.

"Gods be good," Hiccup whispered, his face pale with fear.

Deep within the bowels of the mountain, Mor'du stood on one of the ledges in the large central cavern, laughing as he watched the Red Death pull itself out of the Nest.

"Yes!" Mor'du exclaimed, throwing his hands into the air in victory, blood still flowing from the cut on his burnt hand, "Free! Free at last, Father! After all these years, free at last!"

"Come!" Mor'du exclaimed as he leapt towards the Red Death and grabbed hold of the dragon's tail as it passed by before he began climbing up the beast's back, "Let us have our vengeance upon the world! Let us burn it all to ash!"

A/N: This was a really intense chapter for me to write. I hope you guys like the fact that the final battle has begun! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

37. Where the Brave May Live Forever

****Chapter 37: Where the Brave May Live Forever****

The battle on the beaches of the Nest had ceased as the combatants were distracted by the Red Death's catastrophic release. The Vikings and Highlanders looked up in horror as they watched Red Death pull itself out of the mountain, sending boulders the size of a man tumbling down the rocky cliffs as the Vandal began to cheer in victory.

"By th' Hammer o' Thor," Gobber whispered in awestruck horror.

"Whit is 'at thin'?" Fergus questioned.

"The Red Death," Stoick answered, his voice barely above a whisper, "Odin forgive me, Hiccup was right."

"We hae tae get everyane oot o' here," Fergus said, turning away from the massive dragon to look at Stoick, "We hae tae get our people tae safety."

"And where will we go?" Stoick asked, his voice full of despair, "Where can we go that that monster can't follow?"

"We cannae stay here, 'at's fer damn sure!" Fergus shouted back, before turning towards where everyone else was gathered, "Back! Back tae th' ships!"

Stoick's eyes widened with horror, looking up as the Red Death turned its attention towards them as the Vikings and Highlanders began to retreat towards their ships on the shore.

"No," Stoick said with a horrified whisper, "No! Wait! Stop!"

As Stoick tried to warn them away from the ships, the Red Death roared before shooting a giant tongue of fire down at the shore line, the auburn flames striking some of the boats in an inferno of heat and dancing flames. Those warriors who had gotten to the ships first screamed in horror and pain as they were set alight, the others forced to stumble away from the blaze, shielding themselves from the intense heat, looking on in terror as they saw their comrades fall and half of their ships burnt to ash, a wall of fire separating them from the few that remained.

"**No, no, no,**" the Red Death's booming voice chided from the top of the mountain, drawing all their attention back to him, "**You can't all leave now. I've only just arrived!**"

"Sun above," Fergus said in horror and awe, turning to look at Stoick, "It can talk?"

"I fear it can do much more than that," Stoick replied as he turned back around and looked up at the Red Death, which grinned down at him.

"**Well, well,**" the Red Death said as it began making its way down the mountainside, knocking large chunks of rock loose and sending them tumbling down the cliffs, "**Look at you all. It fills my heart with joy that you would all come to see me after I'd been away for so long.**"

The Red Death took a few long sniffs of the air before his eyes fell on Stoick in the crowd of Vikings and Highlanders

"**You must be Stoick the Vast,**" the Red Death observed with a malicious grin, "**You smell just like your son. Where is young Hiccup? We have unfinished business, him and I.**"

Stoick said nothing, prompting the Red Death to turn his attention to Fergus.

"**And you must be Fergus,**" the Red Death surmised as he looked at the Highlander king, "**The great Bear King that Mor'du has told me so much about.**"

Fergus said nothing as well, merely gripping his sword tighter as he

looked the Red Death right in the eye.

"**You're all so quiet!**" the Red Death observed with a chuckle, "**I've been alone for so long, I'm simply dying for a conversation.**"

The Red Death looked over the crowd, the Vikings and Highlanders continuing to stare up at him in horror.

"**No one?**" the Red Death questioned as a grin crossed over his reptilian features, "**Very well. I'll have to satisfy some other urges then.**"

With that, the Red Death reared back, flames glowing in the back of his throat, causing the warriors before him to panic and begin to rush for cover. Before the Red Death could unleash his fiery blast, a high pitched screeching noise came from above him a second before a blast slammed into the side of his head, causing him to shriek in pain as he turned his head and unleashed his fire down the side of the mountain away from the others. Snarling in fury, the Red Death turned his gaze skyward, where he saw Hiccup, Merida and Fishlegs swooping down towards him on their dragons.

"**You!**" the Red Death snarled as he watched the three approach, focusing his ire on Hiccup and Toothless in particular, "**I was wondering where you were hiding, Siegfriedson. I see you've brought your friends along too. Save's me the trouble of hunting them down.**"

"You're not hurting anyone anymore!" Hiccup shouted at the Red Death as he and the others flew by.

"Bold words, little fish!" Mor'du shouted back as he climbed up to the top of the Red Death's head, "Let's see if you can back them up!"

"**Yes, let's,**" the Red Death agreed, the wings on its back slowly beginning to stir, gathering their strength to perform a feat they had not performed in an age, "**It's been so long since I last took the air. It will be a joy to do so again.**"

With that, the Red Death stretched out his wings and began to flap them, the force of the movement kicking up a cloud of dirt and grit. The warriors on the ground were forced to cover their eyes as the storm of debris swirled around the while the Red Death's wings slowly lifted his massive bulk into the air. Grinning madly, Mor'du held on tight to the Red Death's spines as they chased after Hiccup and his friends.

The men and women on the ground watched the dragons rise into the air with looks of amazement on their faces. Slowly, Fergus and Stoick lowered their heads and looked at the Vandal standing across the beach from them, the savages slowly becoming aware that the Vikings and Highlanders were still there. The Vandal warriors began to growl and gnash their teeth as they slowly moved towards the other group.

"On your toes!" Stoick shouted, bringing everyone's attention back to the battle at hand as he walked purposefully towards the Vandal, his waraxe gripped tightly in his hands, "The battle's not done

yet!"

"Ye heard him, lads!" Fergus added, prompting the Vikings and Highlanders to follow as the two leaders picked the pace up to a jog, the Vandal's matching as they rushed across the beach, "_Alba gu brath_!"

The two groups quickly began running at top speed at one another, their shouting voices mixing with the rumble of their feet pounding against the stony shore, all rising to a crescendo as the two armies slammed into one another in a cacophony of steel and blood.

As the trio flew into the air above the approaching Red Death, they were quickly joined by Astrid, Snotlout and the twins on their dragons.

"Well, I'm guessing the whole 'keeping the Red Death sealed' part of the plan didn't really work out," Snotlout observed sarcastically.

"No, not really," Hiccup replied with a shake of his head, looking down as the Red Death slowly approached them from below.

"What about Hilde?" Astrid questioned, prompting Hiccup's face to fall as he shook his head sadly, "Oh, I'm so sorry."

"What do we do now?" Tuff questioned.

"The only thing we can do," Hiccup replied, lifting his head to look at the others, "We have to put an end to the two of them, once and for all."

"What if we can't?" Ruff questioned hesitantly.

"Then everyone we know and love is dead, along with countless others," Hiccup answered solemnly, causing the others to pale.

"You know," Snotlout said, looking down at the approaching Red Death, "It just occurred to me, even if we win, we might not all make it."

The teenagers were silent at Snotlout's words, before he lifted his head and looked at Hiccup.

"Hey cuz," Snotlout said, catching Hiccup's attention, "Sorry for all the crap I gave you over the years."

"Don't worry about," Hiccup replied with a shrug and a small smile, "Sorry for dragging you into all of this."

"You kidding?" Snotlout questioned with a snort as he looked back down at the rapidly approaching Red Death, auburn flames trailing from the dragon's mouth, "No place I'd rather be."

"**So polite,**" the Red Death's voice rumbled up towards them, "**Waiting there as death rises to greet you.**"

Looking down, a pensive look crossed Astrid's features as the Red Death climbed higher and higher.

"He was right," Astird commented to no one in particular, "He really is fire and death. Like a flying funeral pyre."

Another pensive look passed over Astrid's face before she calmly closed her eyes and gripped her waraxe tightly before letting out a long, calming breath.

"_Lo there do I see my father,_" Astrid intoned barely above a whisper. She caught Hiccup's attention, the young man looking at her for a moment before turning his attention to the Red Death as well.

"_Lo there do I see my mother,_" Hiccup added, a faraway look in his eyes.

"_Lo there do I see my sister,_" Tuff said, reaching out to his sister as he watched the Red Death climb, the light from his fiery breath slowly illuminating the clouds around the teenagers.

"_My brother,_" Ruff finished, reaching out and grasping her brother's hand tightly, Barf and Belch chirping at one another beneath them.

"_Lo there do I see the line of my people, back to the beginning!_" Snotlout declared resolutely as he gripped his mace tightly and glared into the Red Death's hateful eyes as they grew larger and larger.

"_Lo, they do call to me!_" Fishlegs declared, patting Meatlug on the head as the Gronckle whined beneath him.

"_They bid me take ma place among them,_" Merida said as she nocked an arrow on her bowstring, the words coming to her as if she had known them her entire life.

"_In the halls of Valhalla!_" Astrid shouted, holding her axe above her head as Stormfly roared in challenge at the Red Death.

"_Where the brave!_" Hiccup yelled, drawing Bemuhen, the light from the Red Death's fires reflecting brilliantly in the sword's blade.

"_May live!_" Fishlegs joined in, holding his hammer above his head, glaring at the Red Death as it loomed in front of them.

"_Forever,_" Merida whispered as she drew the bowstring back as the Red Death let out a bellowing roar.

"DOWN!" Hiccup shouted over the din of the Red Death's monstrous roar, prompting the six dragons to fold their wings and dive down straight at the gigantic dragon. In the lead, Toothless charged a plasma blast before firing it, the shot slamming into the side of the Red Death's head, causing the dragon to bellow in pain. Meatlug zipped right behind, peppering the Red Death's back with two fireballs that exploded against the dragon's scales. Flying to the Red Death's left side, Hookfang blasted the giant dragon with its fiery breath, trying to scorch the monster's rust colored scales. Swooping underneath the Red Death, Stormfly turned to the side, holding up one of his razor sharp wings and slicing the monstrous dragon across the belly, drawing a thin line a dark red blood.

Cutting to the side, Boudica unleashed a salvo of spines at the Red Death's face, some finding purchase in the dragon's flesh while others bounced harmlessly off its tough scales. As she flew past the Red Death's head, Boudica scorched his side with a plume of flame as Merida turned and fired an arrow at Mor'du. Snarling, Mor'du turned and batted the arrow away with his sword.

As he watched Merida fly by him, Mor'du saw her nock another arrow and fire it at him, which he knocked away with contemptuous ease. His gaze still focused on Merida, he didn't notice Barf and Belch swooping right towards him until they were practically on top of him. Mor'du juke'd out of the way as Barf and Belch snapped at him with their jaws, but didn't have any time to dodge as they lashed at him with their tails, whipping him hard across the face and causing him to lose his grip on the Red Death's spines. Mor'du fell a short distance before he managed to grab hold of another of the Red Death's spines. Growling, he turned and glared down at the twins, who were cackling as they looked back up at him.

"Ruff, Tuff, look out!" Hiccup shouted in a panic, causing the twins to spin around, watching in horror as the Red Death's clubbed tail swung up at them. The twins let out shouts of surprise and panic as Barf and Belch slammed into the Red Death's tail, having no time to dodge out of the way. The blow knocked the twins off the Zippleback and sent them all spinning through the air. Barf and Belch quickly shook their heads clear before looking at the twins, who were screaming in panic as they plummeted towards the sea. Quickly righting himself, the Zippleback flew over to the twins and grabbed them as the water rushed towards them. Opening their wings, Barf and Belch managed to slow their momentum and began gliding towards the shores of the Nest. The Zippleback was unable to completely halt his momentum though and he slammed into the shallows around the Nest, sending the twins flying off his back a second time, dumping them on the rocky beach.

Ruff quickly pushed herself to her feet as Tuff sat up, groaning in pain as he shook his head. Turning to look at the Zippleback, Ruff found the dragon pulling himself onto shore before collapsing, soaked and exhausted.

"I think Barf and Belch are out of the fight," Ruff observed as she walked over and patted the Zippleback on one of his heads.

"Yeah," Tuff agreed wearily as he pushed himself to his feet and grabbed his spear, keeping his eyes focused in front of him, "But I don't think we are."

Turning around, Ruff saw a half a dozen Vandal approaching them with weapons drawn. Snarling the Vandal charged at the twins, prompting the teens to move to face them. Stepping forward, Tuff quickly batted a Vandal's wild swing away with his spear before spinning around and driving the back point of his spear into the savage's chest. Pulling his spear out, he twirled it around before blocking another Vandal's downward swing with the shaft of his spear. Holding the Vandal's weapon locked above his head, Tuff kicked the savage in the chest, sending the man stumbling back. Spinning his spear, Tuff smacked the Vandal across the face, knocking the man off balance enough for Tuff to twirl his spear back around and drive one of the point's into the barbarian's chest. Kicking the Vandal off his spear, Tuff glanced over his shoulder as another savage charged at him from behind.

Ducking under the Vendal's swing, Tuff swung his spear and struck the Vendal on the back of the leg, forcing him to one knee. Swing his spear the other way, Tuff hit the Vendal's leg the other way, spreading them wider and allowing the young man to swing the spear upwards and strike the man between the legs. The Vendal let out a wheezing cough of pain before Tuff palmed the man's face and shoved him to the ground. Stepping onto the Vendal's chest, Tuff drove his spear into the savage's chest before giving it a twist for good measure.

As some of the Vendal battled her brother, the others moved to attack Ruff. As one swung at her, Ruff blocked the Vendal's arm with her own before driving her knee into his gut. As he doubled over in pain, Ruff drove the palm of her hand into the Vendal's face, breaking his nose and sending him reeling. Stepping forward, Ruff grabbed the Vendal's shoulder before striking him on the chest with her hatchet again and again and again before letting his bloodied body fall to the ground. Seeing another Vendal charging at her, Ruff turned and hurled her hatchet at her, hitting the man square between the eyes and knocking him to the ground. As the final Vendal rushed her, Ruff turned to face him with her dagger in hand. Ruff stepped back to avoid the Vendal's first wild swing before ducking under his follow up. As she spun around him, Ruff swung at the Vendal with her dagger, cutting him on his upper thigh. The Vendal stumbled and hissed, touching the wound with his hand before turning to attack Ruff again. As he did, the Vendal stumbled and fell to his knees, his face growing pale as beads of sweat formed on his forehead. Slowly, the Vendal raised his head and looked at Ruff in confusion.

"Yeah," Ruff snorted, "Zippleback venom's a bitch, ain't it?"

The Vendal said nothing as he collapsed to the ground.

In the skies above them, the other teens began to regroup as the Red Death turned to face them again.

"Are they alright!?" Astrid called, looking worriedly down at the shores below where Barf and Belch had crash landed.

"Aye, Ah can see them!" Merida replied, looking over at Astrid, "They're alright!"

"We won't be for long though!" Snotlout moaned as he pointed up above them, drawing everyone's attention upwards as the Red Death changed direction and began diving towards them.

"**The first volley was yours!**" the Red Death declared, flames licking the air around him as he spoke, "**But the last shall be mine!**"

With that, he fired a huge blast of auburn flames down at the teenagers.

"Scatter!" Hiccup shouted, prompting him and the others to race out of the way of the oncoming inferno. The five managed to dodge the blast, which continued on past them and slammed into the sea below, kicking a cloud of hot steam into the air that quickly swept across the battlefield of the beaches below.

"What do we do now!?" Astrid questioned as they regrouped, the Red

Death chasing after them.

"We have to find some kind of weak point!" Hiccup called over the whipping winds.

"I don't think he has a weak point!" Fishlegs declared, "Six eyes means he has no blind spot and his armor is the thickest I've ever seen! I can't imagine what his shot count is, if he even has one!"

Hiccup thought for a moment before his eyes lit up as an idea struck him.

"His armor might be strong, but his wings aren't!" Hiccup declared.

"What do you mean!?" Snotlout questioned.

"If we take out his wings, he can't fly!" Fishlegs declared, catching on.

"And just like Gobber told us," Hiccup said with a determined look on his face, "A downed dragon is a dead dragon."

Hiccup urged Toothless to turn around, flying back towards the Red Death, the others following along behind him.

"Snotlout!" Hiccup shouted, catching his cousin's attention, "I need you to distract him!"

"Oh, I am all over that!" Snotlout declared, flying straight at the Red Death as the other's broke off to the side, "Come on, Hookfang! Let's get in his ugly face!"

The Monstrous Nightmare roared in agreement as they went swooping right at the Red Death.

"Alright, let's do something crazy!" Snotlout declared as he pulled himself to his feet, using, Hookfang's horns for balance, "Light yourself up!"

Hookfang grunted in confusion.

"Trust me, just do it!" Snotlout shouted back as the duo went barreling towards the Red Death, who glared hatefully at them as they approached. Grunting in reply, Hookfang let out a roar before letting out a blast of fire that quickly began to engulf him. Running forward, Snotlout leapt off Hookfang's nose with a shout just as the Monstrous Nightmare covered himself in flame, the young man landing on the Red Death's head as the dragon slammed into the monster's face. The Red Death roared in surprise as Hookfang began to bite and scratch at the other dragon's face, the flames covering his body licking at the monster's features. At the same time, Snotlout managed to grab hold of one of the Red Death's spines for stability. An idea striking him, Snotlout made his way over to the edge of the Red Death's head, peering over the side and looking directly into one of the dragon's eyes

"Hey, you've got something in your eye!" Snotlout shouted before slamming his mace directly into the Red Death's eye, causing the

beast to bellow in agony, "It was pain!"

As Snotlout and Hookfang worked to distract the Red Death, the other four teens split up, two flying on each side of the monster.

"Aim for his wings!" Hiccup ordered, prompting the dragons to begin peppering the Red Death's wings with fireballs, shooting holes in the fleshy membrane. The Red Death roared in pain as he shook the flaming Hookfang from his face while the teens broke off to swing around for a second attack. Snarling, the Red Death prepared to shoot another fiery blast at the group, but was stopped when Snotlout swung his mace into the monster's eye again, causing his shot to go wide.

"**Get this insolent worm off of me!**" the Red Death bellowed shaking his head as he tried to knock Snotlout loose. Letting out a cry of surprise, Snotlout grabbed hold of one of the Red Death's spines to keep his stability.

"Ha!" Snotlout laughed, "You won't get rid of me that easily!"

"Guess I'll have to try a little harder then," the voice of Mor'du said from behind Snotlout, causing the young man to go pale as he slowly turned around to find the Demon Bear looming over him. Mor'du smiled down at Snotlout before letting out a roar as he raised his waraxe above his head and swung it down at the teenager. Yelping in surprise and fear, Snotlout dove to the side, the blow clanking off the Red Death's scaled head. Sliding across the smooth scales, Snotlout managed to grab hold of one of the Red Death spines to keep him from falling off, leaving him dangling over the open air. Snotlout let out a few panicked noises as he looked down from the dizzying height the Red Death flew at before his attention was brought upwards by Mor'du appearing above him.

"I think this is where you get off," Mor'du commented before pressing his massive foot against Snotlout's fingers. Snotlout let out a shout of pain before letting go of the Red Death's spine, sending him plummeting downwards. Snotlout screamed as he fell, flailing his arms and legs around in a vain attempt to stop his fall. Suddenly, a second before he crashed against the rock shore of the nest, Hookfang came swooping out of the sky before crashing onto the beach and skidding a few feet on his back, Snotlout laying on his stomach. Snotlout kept his eyes squeezed shut for a few moments before opening them and looking around wildly, letting out a whoop of happiness when he saw Hookfang had saved him.

"Oh man, nice save, buddy!" Snotlout exclaimed, patting Hookfang on his belly, "I owe you one."

Hookfang merely let out a grunt in reply, continuing to lay exhausted on the beach.

"Snotlout's down!" Fishlegs declared as the four remaining dragon riders circled back around towards the Red Death, "He's okay but I think his dragon is out of the fight."

"Just keep hitting his wings!" Hiccup shouted as the Red Death barreled towards them.

"**Not this time, Siegfriedson!**" the Red Death declared before he fired another torrent of flames at the teens. The group quickly scattered, trying to avoid the searing auburn fire. As she and Stormfly avoided the blast, Astrid turned to look for the Red Death again, only to find it practically on top of her. Astrid let out a scream of fear and surprise as the Red Death opened its jaws and bit hard into Stormfly, the Timberjack screeching in pain as the teeth dug into its flesh. The force of the blow knocked Astrid off of Stormfly, sending her tumbling through the air before she landed on the Red Death's back. Quickly picking herself up, she saw the Red Death toss Stormfly away, the Timberjack screeching more as it tumbled through the air and crashed into the water below. Astrid sighed in relief as she saw Stormfly pull himself out of the waters, but a chill ran down her back as a large shadow fell over her. Looking up, she saw Mor'du looming over, a predatory grin on his face as he looked down at her.

"Seems like you've lost your ride, girly," Mor'du taunted before taking a swipe at her with his sword, forcing Astrid to roll away. Astrid quickly rolled back to her feet, grabbing her waraxe from the sheath on her back and turning to face Mor'du.

"You're quick," Mor'du observed as he stomped towards Astrid, swinging his sword and axe at her, which the Viking girl managed to parry with a grunt of effort, "And strong too."

A sudden change in direction from the Red Death sent both combatants stumbling, forcing Astrid to grab hold of one of the dragon's spines to keep herself steady. As she regained her bearings, Astrid suddenly found Mor'du looming over her, his sword back in the sheath on his back. Before she could react, Mor'du reached down and grabbed Astrid by the throat, his massive hand almost encompassing her head as he lifted her up into the air.

"I'm tired of waiting to see one of you brats crack open on the ground," Mor'du grumbled as he began to tighten his grip of Astrid's head, the pressure turning her face red, "I'm going to pop your pretty little head here and now."

As Astrid struggled against Mor'du's grip, the others looked down in horror. Fishlegs sat on Meatlug's back, looking at the scene in a panic as he tried to figure out what to do. Then, all at once, his fear left him and was replaced with seething anger. Mor'du had Astrid and he was going to kill her. Fishlegs couldn't allow that. He wouldn't allow that! As Fishlegs' face turned an angry shade of red, his eyes seemed to cloud over, becoming white and pupil-less as the veins in his neck began to bulge.

Yanking hard on Meatlug, he turned the Gronckle towards the Red Death's back. Seeing them coming, the Red Death turned its head towards them and spat a blast of fire. Meatlug managed to zip over the attack, making a beeline for Mor'du and Astrid.

"Meatlug! Save Astrid!" Fishleg bellowed as they approached the two, Mor'du looking like he was moments away from crushing Astrid's skull in his hands. Moments before Fishlegs and Meatlug reached Astrid and Mor'du, the young man stood up on the Gronckle's back before taking a flying leap from the dragon's head. Astrid was still struggling against Mor'du's grip when she caught sight of Fishlegs, her eyes widening at the sight of the young man flying through the air, his

warhammer raised to strike. Sensing something coming his way, Mor'du turned in Fishlegs' direction, only to catch the young man's warhammer square in the face. The blow knocked Mor'du completely off balance, causing the Demon Bear to go stumbling backwards as Fishlegs and Meatlug slammed into him, sending all four of them tumbling off of the Red Death's back, Astrid being knocked from the dragon born's grasp along with his waraxe.

"Sun above!" Merida screamed as she saw the four go falling through the sky. Shaking its head to regain its bearings, Meatlug remember Fishlegs' last command and went buzzing after Astrid, the young woman managing to grab hold of the Gronckle and pull herself onto the dragon's back. Looking around wildly, she caught sight of Mor'du and Fishlegs below them, the two having grabbed on to one another, the young man continuing to hit the Demon Bear repeatedly in the face with his hammer as they plummeted towards the churning sea. Looking around, she saw both Toothless and Boudica diving after Fishlegs and Mor'du, urged on by their riders, but they were too far away to make a difference. Astrid urged Meatlug after them, the Gronckle putting everything it had into catching up with Fishlegs and Mor'du but the dragon was too slow. Far too slow.

"Fishlegs!" Astrid called out in despair.

The shout echoed over the battle happening on the shores of the nest, catching Fishguts' attention over the din of the melee. Turning his gaze skywards, Fishguts caught sight of his son tumbling through the air with the Demon Bear, causing his face to go pale.

"Oh gods, Fishlegs!" Fishguts shouted as he made a mad dash towards the shoreline, shoving past anyone who got in his way, "Fishlegs!"

Growling in anger, Mor'du reached up and grabbed Fishlegs' arms, halting the Viking's next attack before grabbing the young man's throat with his other hand.

"I think that's quite enough of that," Mor'du snarled, his red and grey eyes staring hatefully into Fishlegs' pure white ones, "Got some berserker blood in you, huh? I'm surprised, didn't think you had in you! Still, I liked that axe, and gods only know if I'm going to be able to find it again after all this is over, so for that, I'm going to tear your head off and shove it up your-"

Before Mor'du could finish his sentence, he slammed backfirst into the ocean with Fishlegs on top of him. As the churning water settled around him, Fishlegs floated limply just below the surface for a few moments, his warhammer still in his grasp as Mor'du sank into the blackened depths. Suddenly, Fishlegs eyes shot open, his blue colored pupils having returned. Letting out a panicked shout, air bubbles escaped Fishlegs mouth as he observed his surroundings. Quickly realizing he was underwater, Fishlegs swam for the surface. Breaking through the waves, Fishlegs gasped for air, spitting out sea water that had gotten in his mouth. Turning towards the shore, Fishlegs swam over before he stumbled onto the rocky beach, dragging his hammer limply behind him. Looking down the shoreline, he saw his father waving to him, joined by Astrid as she landed Gronckle next to the large man.

"Oh, thank the gods he's okay," Fishguts said with a sigh relief, "I

thought I had lost him."

"Yeah, I was soâ€¦" Astrid began to agree before the blood ran from her face as relief turned to anguish, "Fishlegs look out!"

A look of confusion passed over Fishlegs' face before he turned around and found a soaked Mor'du towering over him, half way through a backhand. Before Fishlegs could react, Mor'du's fist slammed against the side of Fishlegs' head, knocking the young man clear off his feet. Fishlegs went flying end over end before he rolled against the rock covered ground, ultimately coming to a stop as he slammed his back against a large rock, cracking it as the Viking teen slumped to the ground.

Groaning in pain, Fishlegs felt something in his mouth. Lifting his hand up, he spat whatever was in his mouth into his palm, leaving him looking at two of his teeth in his hand, surrounded by blood. Lifting his head up, Fishlegs found the image of three Mor'du's stomping towards him, the sound of the Demon Bear's heavy footsteps muffled as if the young man was still underwater. Reaching up, Mor'du drew his sword out of its sheath before letting the blade drag ominously next to him.

"â€¦gonna gut youâ€¦" Fishlegs heard Mor'du say through his swimming head as the Demon Bear lifted his sword up and prepared to plunge it into the Viking teen's stomach.

"Nooooo!" Fishguts bellowed as he came in rushing in from the side, swinging his hammer at Mor'du, forcing the Demon Bear to parry the blow, "Not my son! Not my son, you bastard!"

Growling in frustration, Mor'du turned and swung his sword at Fishguts, forcing the Viking to roll out of the way. As Fishguts rolled to his feet, Mor'du was already on him, slashing at the warrior again. This time, Fishguts didn't have any time to dodge and the obsidian blade slashed him across the shoulder, the force of the blow sending him sprawling.

"Dadâ€¦" Fishlegs said weakly, trying to pick himself up off the ground at the sight of his father bleeding on the ground. Before he could move, Mor'du suddenly slammed his foot against Fishlegs' chest, knocking the young man flat and forcing the air from his lungs.

"No, no, no," Mor'du said as if he was scolding a child, "You stay right there."

A shout from the side caught Fishlegs' attention as he saw Astrid come leaping in with her raised. Before she could reach Mor'du, the Demon Bear reached out and grabbed Astrid by the face with his free hand, the sudden stop in momentum causing the Viking teen to drop her waraxe as she fought against the dragon born's grasp. Meatlug came buzzing in right behind Astrid, shooting a fireball at Mor'du. Leaning back slightly, Mor'du avoided the blast, before stepping forward and slamming the hilt of his sword against the top of Meatlugs head, flooring the Gronckle which lay dazed next to Fishlegs.

"Anyone else!?" Mor'du bellowed, holding Astrid and his sword up as he looked out over the battle which had fallen still at the Demon Bear's exclamation, "Anyone else want to step forward, or can I

finally kill someone!?"

Flying above the battle, trying to keep ahead of the crippled Red Death, Hiccup looked down at Mor'du, an expression of anger on his face.

"Merida, keep the Death busy!" Hiccup called out to the Highlander princess.

"Why!?" Merida shouted back in confusion and worry, "Where are ye gaein'!?"

"I'm going to have a few words with my uncle," Hiccup replied before turning Toothless down towards the ground.

"Hiccup, wait!" Merida shouted, reaching a hand out towards the young man.

"**You're not going anywhere, Siegfriedson,**" the Red Death growled as it changed direction to chase after Hiccup. Seeing this, Merida quickly nocked an arrow on her bow and guided Boudica towards the Red Death with her knees.

"Oi!" Merida shouted as she loosed her arrow. The Red Death turned one of its eyes towards Merida out of curiosity, only to have the arrow fly right into the eye and blind him. The Red Death screeched in pain as he thrashed in the air.

"It ain't a Siegfriedson ye hae tae be worried about!" Merida taunted as the Red Death turned towards her, "It's a daughter o' Boudica!"

"**I'll peel the flesh from your bones for that, you Highlander whore!**" the Red Death bellowed back as he chased after Merida, allowing Hiccup and Toothless to safely reach the ground below.

"I think I'll start with you, little berserker," Mor'du said as he pointed his sword down at Fishlegs, "Maybe knock the rest of those teeth out of that little head of yours."

"Mor'du!" Hiccup shouted as Toothless landed a short distance away from the Demon Bear, the young man sliding off the Night Fury's back.

"Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here!?" Mor'du yelled back, only glancing over his shoulder at Hiccup.

"Uncle!" Hiccup shouted louder, causing a look of surprise to cross Mor'du's foul features, quickly replaced by a wide grin.

"So, the hag told you everything, did she?" Mor'du questioned with a chuckle, "Where is she now?"

"She's dead," Hiccup replied solemnly, "You killed her."

"Tragic," Mor'du observed uncaringly, "And here I thought we would all be one big happy family."

Stepping off of Fishlegs, Mor'du turned to face Hiccup.

"What do you want from your Uncle Mor'du, little fish?"

"I want you to let my friends go," Hiccup stated, looking Mor'du dead in the eye.

"And what do I get in return?" Mor'du asked.

"You fight me, one on one," Hiccup answered, drawing a shocked gasp from the Vikings and Highlanders.

"A duel?" Mor'du questioned, to which Hiccup nodded in reply.

"To the death?" Mor'du pushed, getting a further nod from Hiccup.

"I accept," Mor'du stated as he casually tossed Astrid away, sending the young woman rolling across the ground, "I'll even make it more sporting and let your little dragon friend fight too."

"Hiccup!" Stoick shouted from the crowd as he muscled his way towards the front, "Hiccup, don't do it!"

"I'm going to make you pay for what you've done to the people I care about," Hiccup said, ignoring his father as he tightened his grip on his sword, Toothless at his side, snarling at Mor'du.

"Like I said before, little fish," Mor'du replied as he readied his sword, a manic grin on his face, "Come make me pay."

With that, Mor'du charged forward, his sword raised to cut Hiccup in half. Hiccup quickly dove to the side as Mor'du slammed his sword onto the ground where the young man had been standing a moment before, knocking rocks and debris into the air. Roaring, Toothless leapt forward, sinking his teeth into Mor'du's shoulder. Mor'du grunted in pain before tossing Toothless off, the Night Fury landing hard on his back.

While Mor'du was distracted, Hiccup ran forward, slashing at the back of Mor'du's leg with Bemuhen. Mor'du hissed in pain and briefly fell to one knee before quickly standing up and spinning around, swinging his sword in a downward arc as he turned. Hiccup managed to avoid the attack, but was sent reeling as the obsidian blade cut through the ground and kicked up a cloud of earthen debris. As Hiccup tried to catch himself, Mor'du came charging out of the cloud and kicked the young man hard in the chest, sending him tumbling end over end across the hard ground, his helmet falling off his head and skipping across the rocks.

Landing on the ground, Hiccup quickly managed to sit up and see Mor'du charging at him a second time. Reaching down, he grabbed his crossbow and pointed it at Mor'du. Pulling the trigger, Hiccup fired an arrow into Mor'du's shoulder, causing the Demon Bear to stumble for half a step but not stop him. Before Hiccup could reload, Mor'du ran up and knocked the crossbow out of Hiccup's hand with his sword, using the momentum to swing the obsidian blade over his head. As Mor'du brought his sword crashing down on Hiccup, the young man was able to grab his own sword with both hands and lift it above himself to block the oncoming attack. Mor'du hit Hiccup with enough force to push Hiccup into the earth a few inches, the shock causing the Viking teen's body to go numb for a moment. Mor'du rested the heavy blade against Hiccup's for a moment, Bemuhen's strong steel holding against

the obsidian blade but the pressure causing the metal to cut into Hiccup's right hand, blood leaking down his palm.

"Your sword is strong," Mor'du said as he lifted his sword up in order to slam it down again, "But you're not, little fish."

Before Mor'du could deliver another blow, a high-pitched screech filled the air before a plasma bolt slammed into Mor'du from behind. Growling, he turned to face Toothless as the Night Fury leapt at him. Reaching out, Mor'du managed to grab Toothless by his neck and swing him around, slamming him into Hiccup before tossing the Night Fury away, sending them both sprawling.

"Hiccup!" Merida cried in terror from her position above the battle.

"**You should be worried about your own battles, girl!**" the Red Death rumbled from above her before he slammed his wings down hard, kicking up a massive gust of wind that struck Merida and Boudica like a ton of bricks, sending them tumbling through the air. Boudica managed to right herself a few feet above the ground, resulting in a crash landing that sent Merida sprawling as she was knocked from the Nadder's back. Merida hissed in pain as she tore her leggings and scrapped her knee on the hard rocks, blood beginning to ooze down her leg. Painfully picking herself up, she saw the Red Death landing on the broken summit of the Nest, roaring in triumph as he observed the spectacle below.

"**Skin him alive, boy!**" the Red Death bellowed from the mountain top, "**I want the Siegfriedson to suffer!**"

"As you wish, Father," Mor'du muttered in reply as he walked slowly towards Hiccup, who was having trouble picking himself up, the Demon Bear dragging his blade behind him. Fighting erupted in the crowd as some of the Vikings and Highlanders tried to help Hiccup only for the Vandal to block their path.

"Hiccup!" Merida cried as she pulled herself to her feet.

"Get oot o' there, lad!" Gobber shouted as he tried to fight away his way through a group of Vandal.

"Hiccup!" Merida shouted again, limping towards him, her voice full of despair, watching as Hiccup slowly tried to crawl away from Mor'du.

"Mor'du!" Stoick bellowed over the din of battle, "Stay away from my son, you bloody bastard! Mor'du!"

"HICCUP!" Merida cried, tears streaming down her face as she stumbled next to Toothless, who lay on the ground stunned.

Sitting nearby, Fishlegs had managed to pull himself into a seating position against the boulder he had crashed into. He looked over at his best friend with glassy eyes, his head still reeling from the blow he had received.

"Hiccup," Fishlegs muttered, closing his eyes, "He can't beat him."

"Yes, he can," a voice in Fishlegs' head argued, one that sounded oddly like Hilde.

"Howâ€|he shrugs off everything we throw at himâ€|" Fishlegs questioned.

"You're such a smart boy, Leser," Hilde's voice echoed in his head, "You hafe all zee puzzle pieces. You just need to put zem togezer."

"Bone may turn to stone and flesh may become steel," Fishlegs muttered Hilde's last words, "But the mind is soft and weak and eyes do not freeze."

Fishlegs paused as the last words echoed back to him.

"Eyes do not freeze," he repeated.

All at once, the memory of Merida telling them of her father's battle with Mor'du came flooding back to him.

"He stood twelve feet tall, a claymore in ane hand an' a waraxe in th' other," Merida's voice rang in Fishlegs' ears, "He wears th' hide of a massive black bear as a trophy, its hide strewn with th' weapons o' fallen warriors."

"Bone may turn to stone and flesh may become steel," Hilde's voice interrupted as Fishlegs focused intently on Mor'du.

"His body was scarred by a thousand battles," Merida's voice continued as Fishlegs looked at Mor'du's face.

"But zee mind is soft and veak," Hilde's voice cut in as Fishlegs looked at Mor'du's mismatched eyes.

"His face marredâ€|" Merida's voice trailed off.

Why were his eyes different?

"And eyes do not freeze," Hilde's voice echoed in Fishlegs' head.

One red eye, one grey eye.

"With ane dead eye," Merida's voice finished.

"One dead eye," Fishlegs repeated to himself, before his eyes suddenly went wide in realization. His mind suddenly clearer than it had ever been, Fishlegs scrambled to his feet, clawing at the rock he was leaning against to pull himself up.

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs called, trying to catch the other Viking's attention, "HICCUP!"

Hiccup weakly looked over to Fishlegs, who was waving his arms wildly to catch his best friend's attention.

"HIS EYE!" Fishlegs bellowed as loud as he could, pointing at his own eye for emphasis, "YOU HAVE TO GET HIM IN THE EYE!"

A look of realization crossed Hiccup's face before he looked around wildly, catching sight of his crossbow laying a short distance away. Looking back over his shoulder, Hiccup saw that Mor'du was standing over him, raising his massive foot to stomp on the young man. A surge of strength returning to him, Hiccup quickly rolled out of the way as Mor'du brought his foot down, creating a small crater in the ground as the force of the blow sent Hiccup rolling further.

Pushing himself to his feet, Hiccup quickly grabbed the crossbow while pulling an arrow from the quiver on his hip. Before he could load it, Mor'du swung at him with his sword, forcing Hiccup to stumble back to avoid the attack. Hiccup quickly loaded the arrow onto the crossbow, the fuse hanging from the arrowhead. Looking around, he spotted his sword laying a short distance away. The rumbling earth brought Hiccup's attention back to Mor'du as the Demon Bear charged at him again, stabbing at the young man with his obsidian sword. Hiccup rolled out of the way, causing Mor'du's sword to become stuck in the earth. As Mor'du moved to pull his sword free, Hiccup grabbed his own as well as a rock laying next to it. Setting his crossbow down, Hiccup took his sword in one hand and the rock in the other before running the rock down Bemuh's blade, sending sparks flying. As Hiccup had hoped, one of the sparks hit the fuse, which began to quickly burn.

Standing up, Hiccup took his crossbow in both hands as Mor'du pulled his sword out of the ground and turned to face the young man. Hiccup leveled the crossbow at Mor'du, who smiled as he readied his sword. As Hiccup aimed, he took a deep, calming breath as the world seemed to slow down around him. Everything seemed to fall away as Hiccup focused in on Mor'du's blood red eye. The smell of smoke from the burning wick mixed with the scent of black rock, all swirling together with the saltiness of the sea. Hiccup felt the smooth wood of the crossbow in his hand, the small vibration of the stretched wire yearning to be released. Slowly, Hiccup exhaled and pulled the trigger.

The arrow sprang from crossbow like a caged animal being unleashed, a thin trail of smoke following in its wake. The Demon Bear saw the arrow rocketing towards him. The Demon Bear lifted his sword to block.

The Demon Bear was too slow.

A blood curdling cry of anguish swept across the beach as Mor'du clawed at his face, covering his now bleeding eye with his hand in a vain attempt to squelch the pain, the shaft of the offending arrow sticking out from between his fingers, his sword falling forgotten to the ground.

"ARRRRGH!" Mor'du cried in pain and fury, "My eye! You little bastard, my eye!"

Letting his hands fall from his face, Mor'du looked around blindly, trying to find Hiccup as he swiped wildly at the air, coming nowhere close to the young man who watched the Demon Bear impassively.

"Where are you!?" Mor'du demanded as he continued to search for Hiccup, "Where are you, Haddock!?"

Hiccup continued to say nothing, taking a half step away from Mor'u as he watched the fuse burn right up to Mor'du's eye socket.

"When I find you, I'm going to put out both of your eyes, Haddock!" Mor'du roared, sniffing the air in an effort to track Hiccup down, "Except when I do it, it will be with my member as Iâ€|as Iâ€|"

Mor'du paused as he took a few more curious sniffs of the air, a look of confusion on his face.

"Why does everything smell like dragon shit?" Mor'du questioned.

As if to answer Mor'du's question, a muffled bang came from his direction causing Mor'du to shudder before going stock still. For a few long moments, Mor'du merely stood in place, occasionally twitching, but remaining eerily silent. Then, blood began to trickle out of his nose, then from his ears. Soon enough, Mor'du began to cry tears of blood from his blind eyes. Letting out a choked cough, Mor'du spat up more blood, the ichor mixing with his coarse beard. Then, all at once, Mor'du fell to the ground like a toppled tree, the impact of his bulk shaking the earth and the Demon Bear moved no more.

A quiet moment fell over the battlefield as Vendal, Viking and Highlander alike looked on in shock at the dead body of Mor'du. Reaching down, Hiccup picked up his sword before hoisting it above his head while shouting as loud as he could. Merida quickly joined in, holding her bow over her head, before Toothless joined in as well, his monstrous roar echoing across the island. Soon enough, all of the Vikings, Highlanders and dragons had joined in as the remaining Vendal looked on in fear. Without a word or sound, the Vendal began to scramble away, retreating into the dark shadows of the Nest as the assembled warriors roared in triumph.

These shouts of triumph were silence by the Red Death's own bellowing roar from atop the Nest.

"**You think you've won!?" the Red Death demanded, hate filling his voice, "**This changes nothing! The only thing that will happen now is I will make you all suffer more before the end!**"

The Red Death then focused his gaze onto Hiccup.

"**Especially you, Seigfreidson,**" the Red Death growled.

"You want me!?" Hiccup shouted back as he made his way over to Toothless, who was growling up at the Red Death, "You've got me!"

Mounting up, Hiccup moved to take off, but was stopped when he felt someone's hand on his shoulder. Glancing behind him, Hiccup saw Merida pulling herself up onto the saddle behind him.

"Mer, what are you doing?" Hiccup questioned in concern.

"Did ye really think, after everythin' we've been through, Ah was gaein' tae let ye dae this alone?" Merida questioned, before reaching out and gripping Hiccup's shoulder, "Ah almost jist watched ye die, Hic. Ye're nae gaein' tae make me dae it again."

"Alright," Hiccup agreed with a small smile, reaching up and touching Merida's hand with his own. Turning Hiccup was about to urge Toothless into the air when he saw his father emerge from the crowd.

"Hiccup," Stoick said, a look of worry on his face, "I'm sorry, son. I was wrong."

Hiccup paused before nodding at his father. Turning towards Toothless, Hiccup pat the Night Fury on the back of the head.

"Alright, bud," Hiccup said, a look of determination on his face, "Let's put an end to this."

Toothless barked in agreement before shooting up into the sky, kicking up a cloud of dirt as he went. The three of them soared up towards the Red Death, which watched them angrily.

"Come on, you overgrown salamander!" Hiccup shouted down at the Red Death, "Come and get me!"

"**With pleasure!**" the Red Death roared back before leaping into the air, following Toothless and the two teens as they led him up into the gathering storm clouds.

A/N: So this chapter ended up being very long but I couldn't be happier. I've been imagining the events of this chapter for a long while, so I hope you guys enjoyed it! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

38. Through the Fire and the Flames

****Chapter 38: Through the Fire and the Flames****

Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed in the storm clouds that gathered over the Nest, moving in swiftly as Toothless and the Red Death rose higher and higher into the sky. Merida clung tightly to Hiccup's back, glancing over her shoulder at the Red Death, who continued to race after them, auburn flames licking the air as they poked through the gaps in the dragon's teeth as he glared hatefully up at them.

"Whit dae we dae now!?" Merida questioned over the howling wind.

"We have to keep him off balance!" Hiccup shouted back, focused on the approaching storm clouds as they drew closer to them, "We have speed on him, we need to use that! If we can cripple his wings, the fall might kill him, or at least hurt him! We have to lose him first!"

Merida nodded before looking back at the Red Death who was doggedly chasing them.

"**You think a storm will stop me, Siegfriedson!?**" the Red Death shouted after them as they disappeared into the storm cloud, "**I do not fear the thunder and the gale! This storm will weep over your graves!**"

Flying into the storm cloud, the Red Death was pelted by rain and buffeted by winds, but he paid little heed to either. Looking around, his five remaining eyes scanned the storm, looking for any sign of the Night Fury and its riders. Lighting flashed around him and for the briefest of moments, the Red Death thought it caught sight of a black shadow streaking through the storm, but just as quickly, the dragon lost sight of it. As thunder boomed in every direction, it rattled the Red Death's sensitive ears as well as covering up a screeching noise, hiding it from the dragon until a blast of plasma seared through his wing.

The Red Death roared in pain and anger as he spun around in the air to try and find the source of the attack, only for another blast to strike his other wing from behind. Roaring in frustration, the Red Death turned around again, only for a third attack to come shooting down from above him.

"**Enough of this!**" the Red Death bellowed before unleashing and inferno from his mouth as he spun in place, creating a twisting firestorm that spread through the storm, vaporizing rain and illuminating the black cloud. Zipping over the clawing flames, Hiccup flew Toothless back towards where the Red Death, only to find that the massive dragon had vanished.

"Where'd he gae!?" Merida questioned as all three of them looked around wildly for any sign of the Red Death.

"**Two can play at this game, Siegfriedson!**" the Red Death bellowed from below them as his massive head appeared through the churning storm. Opening his mouth, the Red Death shot a blast of fire up at the trio. Caught off guard, Toothless was just barely able to get out of the way, the column of flame shooting out of the top of the storm cloud like an erupting volcano. The heat rippled through the air around the fire, forcing Hiccup to raise his right hand in order to shield his face from it as his skin cracked and blistered. Hissing in pain, Hiccup pulled his hand back to his body as Toothless flew away from the flames.

"Are ye okay!?" Merida questioned, a worried look on her face.

"I'm fine!" Hiccup called back, hissing as he gingerly lowered his hand back to Toothless' saddle.

Swinging Toothless back around, the group moved to make another pass at the Red Death as the dragon climbed back into the storm cloud. Toothless opened his mouth and screeched, but instead of firing a blast of plasma, the Night Fury began sputtering and coughing as he seemed to choke briefly. Turning towards them, the Red Death opened its massive jaws as it tried to swallow Toothless whole. Ducking low, Merida and Hiccup held on to Toothless as he barrel rolled through the Red Death's jaws, his tail inching past the dragon's teeth.

As Toothless spun, Merida lost her grip on his saddle and slipped off, screaming as she managed to just grab hold of Hiccup before she could go spinning off into the air. Turning around, Hiccup reached out and grabbed Merida by her arm before pulling her in, the Highlander princess quickly latching on to the young man as she resealed herself.

"Are you alright!?" Hiccup asked, earning a nod from Merida as she clung to him, shaking as tried to catch her breath. Nodding, Hiccup turned his attention towards Toothless.

"What's wrong, bud!?" Hiccup questioned. Toothless turned and looked up at Hiccup before letting out another hacking cough.

"Oh crap," Hiccup muttered to himself in understanding.

"Whit's wrong!?" Merida questioned.

"I think we just figured out what a Night Fury's shot limit is!" Hiccup called back, an awkward look on his face, "Or at least we would if I had been keeping count."

"He's oot!?" Merida asked incredulously, "Whit dae we dae now then!?"

A pensive look crossed Hiccup's face as he tried to figure out what to do. As he thought, a monstrous roar mixed with booming thunder caught his attention. Turning back, Hiccup saw the Red Death turning towards them as it unleashed another blast of fire. Urging Toothless downwards, the three barely managed to avoid the blast, the fires getting so close Hiccup could swear he felt the hairs on the back of his neck being singed off. As they ducked back into the cloud bank, inspiration struck Hiccup.

"I've got an idea!" he declared as he looked back at Merida, "It's a bit of a longshot though!"

"It's better than naethin'!" Merida replied, "Whit's yer idea!?"

Reaching down to his quiver, Hiccup pulled out an arrow and handed it to her.

"Ah cannae take th' Red Death doon with a single arra, Hiccup!" Merida shouted angrily at him.

"Maybe not a regular arrow!" Hiccup agreed, "But that's the other black powder arrow I made! I killed Mor'du with one, you'll kill the Red Death with the other!"

"Black powder is powerful, Hic, but nae even Toothless' blasts cud pierce th' Red Death's armor!" Merida argued.

"You're not shooting for his armor!" Hiccup shouted back, earning a confused look from Merida, "Don't you remember, Mer? Dragons aren't fireproof on the inside!"

A look of realization passed over Merida's face as she looked back at the arrow, lightning slashing through the sky behind them.

"Ye're right," Merida agreed, turning her attention back to him, "This is a longshot!"

"Told you!" Hiccup stated with a chuckle.

"How am Ah supposed tae light this thin'!?" Merida asked.

"If you time it right, you won't have to!" Hiccup explained as thunder boomed around them.

"Alright," Merida said, a determined look on her face as she unslung her bow from her shoulders, holding on tightly to Toothless with her knees, "Get me a shot!"

"On it!" Hiccup replied as he steered Toothless back towards where the Red Death was. Seeing them emerging from the clouds, the Red Death smiled.

"**There you are, Siegfriedson,**" the Red Death growled, "**I grow tired of this game of hide and seek**."

With a roar, the Red Death fired another blast of fire at the trio, forcing Toothless to swoop under the flames.

"Alright," Hiccup replied before Toothless landed on the Red Death's nose, made a face and leapt off again, "How about some tag!?"

Snarling in fury, the Red Death chased after them, following as Toothless went swooping out of the storm clouds and went diving back towards the ground below. Folding his wings, the Red Death followed, the storm cloud breaking around him like waves against the shore.

As lightning clashed and thunder boomed around her, Merida nocked the black powder arrow in her bow and turned around to look at the Red Death, the dragon diving after them, flames leaking from his mouth, making him look like a hellish comet.

"You're only going to get one shot at this!" Hiccup shouted at her as they dove towards the top of the Nest, "Make it count!"

"Ye worry about flyin', Ah'll worry about shootin'!" Merida called back as she pulled her bowstring back and leveled the arrow at the Red Death who barely seemed to notice.

"**Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide!**" the Red Death bellowed after them, "**Your luck's run out, time to die!**"

Both teens ignored the threat, Hiccup focused on the rapidly approaching ground as Merida kept her eyes trained on the Red Death.

"Come on," Merida whispered, her hair whipping in the wind next to her as the gales howled like hungry wolves.

"Come on!" Merida cried in frustration as they continued to plummet, the Red Death's hateful grin drawing closer and closer.

"Mer!" Hiccup gave a worried call as they fast approached the broken summit of the Nest.

"Come on!" Merida shouted, her words amplified by the screaming wind, "Smile fer me ye demon's whoreson! COME ON!"

As if to answer her call, the Red Death let out a bellowing roar as flames licked the back of his throat. As the Red Death's cavernous maw opened, Merida saw her opportunity and the world seemed to freeze

around her. Merida pulled her bowstring a half an inch tighter, the rains making the string slick in her fingers. The smell of brimstone filled her nose, mixing with the unmistakable smell of black powder. Lightning slashed through the air behind the Red Death, crawling like a stream across the barren earth. Then Merida let go, and the arrow flew.

Soaring up into the sky, the arrow was battered by wind and rain as it spun through the air, flecks of black powder trailing in its wake. For a horrible second, the arrow veered off course, but the wind quickly flung it back in the other direction, sending it right for the Red Death's open mouth, a fireball racing up out of his throat. A second before the flames left the Red Death's mouth, the arrow flew into the inferno and was engulfed.

Thunder boomed and all was fire.

The black powder exploding in the Red Death's mouth set off a chain reaction, quickly turning the dragon's body into a furnace that began engulfing him alive. Every orifice on the Red Death's body burned with auburn flames as he tumbled through the sky, thrashing and roaring in pain.

"**IT BURNS!**" the Red Death screamed as the fireball engulfed him, "**THE FIRE! IT BURNS!**"

"Hiccup!" Merida shouted as she slung her bow back around her shoulders and turned back towards him, the raging inferno that was the Red Death barreling after them.

"Hold on!" Hiccup yelled, prompting Merida to grab hold of him before Toothless' wings flared and they went shooting back up into the sky. The Red Death was so close that they had no way of safely going around the blaze that he had become. As fire burned all around them, Toothless dodged between the Red Death's spines, Hiccup and Merida holding on for dear life.

Then, suddenly, a rogue tongue of flame shot out and engulfed Toothless' prosthetic fin. Toothless yelped in panic as all control was lost, Hiccup mashing wildly on a pedal that now did nothing. Looking up, Hiccup's eyes widened in fear as the Red Death's clubbed tail came falling right at them. With nowhere to go, Hiccup could only clench his eyes shut as Toothless slammed into the club with a pained yelp.

The force of the impact threw both Hiccup and Merida from Toothless' saddle, the blow leaving them stunned as they tumbled up into the air. Shaking his head clear, Hiccup looked around and saw Merida next to him, screaming in fear and squirming helplessly as they began to fall, Toothless tumbling through the air somewhere above them.

In one horrible moment it all became clear to Hiccup. There was no getting out of this. Even if Toothless could reach them, his tail fin was gone, which meant he could no longer fly. All three of them were as good as dead.

Focusing on Merida again, Hiccup saw her still screaming in fear as they plummeted towards the ground below.

"Merida!" he called over the whipping wind, "Merida!"

Looking over to his with her icy blue eyes full of fear, Merida saw Hiccup holding his hand out to her, a sad look on his face. Realization striking her, tears began to well up in Merida's eyes as she took his hand. Pulling themselves to one another, Merida buried her face into Hiccup's shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her.

"I love you!" Merida cried, looking up at him, the wind carrying away her tears.

"I love you too," Hiccup replied before pulling her close and kissing her. Below them, the flaming ruin of the Red Death struck the top of the Nest, igniting the brimstone and black rock within, creating a catastrophic explosion that sent smoke, debris and globs of lava spewing into the air. But Hiccup and Merida were blind to all of it, so wrapped up in one another they even failed to notice Toothless struggling after them, putting every ounce of strength into his wings as he desperately reached out for them as lightning lanced through the air behind him.

Then thunder boomed and all was fire.

Down on the beach, the terrific explosion had knocked most of the Vikings and Highlanders to the ground. Slowly picking themselves up, they looked up at the top of the Nest, the peak covered in a blazing inferno. For a few, silent moments, the men and women stared up at the burning peak before one man let out a whoop of joy, prompting them all to begin shouting in victory.

"They did it!" Fergu shouted from his position next to Stoick, slapping the Viking chief on his shoulder, "Sun above, they bloody well did it!"

Stoick said nothing as he looked around, worry growing in his eyes as he failed to find any sign of the Night Fury and his riders.

"Where are they?" Stoick questioned.

"Huh?" Fergus asked in confusion.

"Where are our children, Fergus?" Stoick questioned again, turning and looking Fergus dead in the eye. A look of horrible realization cross Fergus' face before he began looking around wildly as well, finding no sign of any of them.

"Where are they!?" Fergus called, catching others confused attention as the cheering slowly died down, "Where are Merida and Hiccup!?"

The crowd began to murmur amongst themselves as realization swept over them as well.

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs called as he struggled to stay on his feet, scanning the beach with his eyes, "Merida!"

"Merida!" Astrid joined in, helping to keep Fishlegs on his feet, "Hiccup!"

Slowly, the rest of the crowd began to join in, everyone looking for

any sign of the two teens on the beach.

"Spread out!" Stoick ordered, "Search the beach!"

The warriors did as they were bid, spreading out over the stony beach, their voices echoing off of the barren rocks. The rain began to fall in earnest now, the drops battering off the gather metal of their armor, making a tremendous din.

"Hiccup!" Will called, cupping his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice, "Where are ye, laddie!?"

"Merida!" Ruff shouted, "Red! You there, Red!?"

"Hiccup!" Fergus shouted, a look of worry on his face as he searched, "Come on lad, Hiccup!"

"Merida!" Stoick bellowed, "Where are you girl!? Merida!"

"Here!" Snotlout called from down the beach, grabbing everyone's attention, "I think I found them! Over here!"

Racing down the shore, Stoick and Fergus made it to where Snotlout was as a crowd began to gather around the young man. Looking to where his nephew indicated, Stoick saw a pile of rubble sitting on the beach with the unmistakable sight of a Night Fury's tail sticking out.

"Oh gods no," Stoick whispered before running over to the pile and grabbing the large rock that made up most of the pile. Grunting with effort, Stoick tried to lift the large rock off but the stone refused to budge.

"Iâ€|" he grunted as he tried again and failed, "I can't move it!"

"Here, let me help," Fergus said as he rushed over to Stoick's side and grabbed onto the rock as well, "On three, alright?"

Stoick nodded in reply.

"Ane!" Fergus called.

"Two!" Stoick followed.

"Three!" the two men shouted together before lifting the rock with all their might. Slowly, the large rock lifted into the air and the two men quickly tossed it to the side with grunts, the stone hitting the ground with a large thud. Turning their attention back to the pile, Stoick and Fergus quickly brushed the rest of the rocks away, revealing Toothless laying on the ground, his wings wrapped around himself.

A look of sorrow came over Stoick's features as he fell to his knees in despair.

"I did this," Stoick muttered, his eyes cast downward. As he did, Toothless' eyes slowly opened and he looked at the two men standing over him. Seeing this, Fergus put his hand on Stoick's shoulder, bringing the man's gaze back to the Night Fury.

"Please," Fergus pleaded to Toothless, "Our children—where are our children?"

Toothless regarded the men for a few silent moments before folding his wings behind his back, revealing Merida and Hiccup hugged against his chest.

"Oh gods," Stoick said as he stumbled forward on his hands and knees while Toothless released the two teens from his grasp. Hiccup and Merida lay silently on the ground, their eyes closed. Merida's braid had been engulfed by the fires, leaving the remaining burnt ends of her red locks hanging just above her shoulders. Hiccup's right arm was covered in a burn that snaked from his hand to his shoulder, the sleeve of his tunic having been burnt away.

"Are they alive?" Fishlegs asked worriedly from the crowd behind the two men.

Reaching down, Stoick put his hands over the two teens' mouths. He waited for a moment before a large smile crossed his face.

"They're alive!" Stoick declared happily, causing the crowd to cheer as he scooped Hiccup into his arms, "Thank Odin, they're alive!"

Happy tears welling up in his eyes, Fergus reached down and picked up Merida, holding his daughter close. Gobber cheered along with the rest of the warriors, smiling at the scene before him. Suddenly, he saw something that made his blood run cold as the smile fell away from his face.

"Stoick," Gobber said, failing to get the oblivious chief's attention, "Stoick!"

Stoick whirled around, looking at Gobber in confusion, the blacksmith's tone drawing others' attentions as well.

"His leg, Stoick," Gobber said, a haunted look on his face as he indicated towards the leg in question, "Look at his leg."

Slowly, Stoick turned to look at Hiccup's legs, dread filling his heart as a number of gasps came from the crowd. What he saw almost caused his heart to break. The left leg of Hiccup's pants had been burnt away up to the knee, along with his boot, leaving the young man's flesh exposed. To Stoick's horror, Hiccup's lower leg was burnt so badly the flesh had turned black and had begun to crack. The ankle of his foot was twisted unnaturally and for a horrible moment Stoick spied exposed bone.

"Gods be good," Stoick prayed before snapping his head up, "To the ships! Back to the ships!"

All at once, everyone was moving, Stoick racing through the crowd, pushing people out of the way as he ran towards one of the remaining longships on the shore.

"Shove off!" Stoick ordered, pulling himself onto the ship and placing his waraxe on the deck next to him as people began piling into the remaining longships and preparing them to set sail, "Shove

off now!"

As the men followed his orders, Fergus climbed onto the ship along with Astrid, Fishlegs, Fishguts, Gobber and Toothless. Boudica squawked as she landed on the prow of the ship, looking down at the racing men and women.

"You're going to be fine, son," Stoick reassured Hiccup as the young man began to stir, groaning weakly in pain.

"Stoick," Fergus said, setting Merida gently down on the deck as he tried to catch the chief's attention.

"We're going to get you back to Gothi and she'll take care of you," Stoick went on, ignoring Fergus, "You're going to be fine."

"Stoick!" Fergus shouted as the longship began to pull away from shore.

"What!?" Stoick roared, rounding on Fergus angrily.

"He cannae keep it," Fergus replied calmly as the longships sails unfurled.

"What?" Stoick asked in confusion, the rain pattering against the wooden boards of the deck.

"It will fester long afore we get back tae Berk," Fergus elaborated, "If he keeps it, he's as good as dead."

"What are you talking about?" Stoick asked, still not following.

"His leg, Stoick," Gobber spoke up, patting his peg leg for emphasis, "He cannae keep it."

A look of understanding crossed Stoick's face as he looked down at Hiccup, who was beginning to writhe in pain in his arms.

"I'll do it," Stoick said, reaching for his waraxe sitting next to him, only to have it snatched away by Gobber.

"No, Ah'll dae it," Gobber said insistentlly, "Nae man shud harm his own son."

"He's your son as much as mine," Stoick argued as he placed Hiccup on the deck, the people gathered on deck with them pushing back to make room. The boat creaked as it sailed through the rocks surrounding the Nest, guided by Boudica on the prow.

Gobber could only smirk at the comment before a grim expression set in as he kneeled by Hiccup's injured leg, the axe gripped in his hand.

"Stoick, Fergus," Gobber said to the two leaders, "Hold him doon."

The men nodded in reply, kneeling down on either side of Hiccup and holding his arms and chest in place. Nodding, Gobber scanned the deck

before he spotted Fishlegs.

"Fishlegs, come here," Gobber said, prompting the young man to nervously make his way across the deck to them. Reaching down, Gobber grabbed a length of rope laying on the ground and handed it to Fishlegs.

"Ah need ye tae hold his head still," Gobber explained as Fishlegs took the rope, "An' put this in his mouth."

"Why?" Fishlegs asked in confusion.

"So he daenae bite his own tongue off," Gobber answered grimly.

Fishlegs went white as a sheet but did as he was bid, Hiccup's moaning muffled by the gag.

"Okay," Gobber said resolutely, "Ye lot ready?"

The three nodded their heads, prompting Gobber to nod his own. As he did, Gobber saw Merida begin to stir, sitting up as she awoke.

"Whit are ye daein'?" Merida asked groggily, "Whit are ye daein' tae him?"

"Astrid!" Gobber barked, catching the young woman's attention as he indicated towards Merida with his eyes.

"Stop!" Merida shouted as she stood up and started to move towards the men, "Whit are ye daein' tae him!? Stop!"

"Astrid, keep her back!" Gobber shouted, prompting the blonde to step forward and wrap her powerful arms around Merida.

"Whit are ye daein'!?" Merida demanded, kicking her legs as Astrid picked her up off the deck and physically carried the princess away, "Stop! Put me doon! Stop!"

"Hold him steady," Gobber ordered, as he lifted the axe into the air, a flash of lightning reflecting off the blade.

"Stop! Whit are they daein' tae him!?" Merida called as Astrid put her down, only to grab the red head's face and force the Highlander to look at her.

Gobber hesitated as he looked down at Hiccup's face, discomfort having given way to pain on his features.

"Look at me!" Astrid shouted as Merida continued to struggle against her, "Damn it, Merida, look at me!"

Merida stopped struggling and looked at Astrid, her icy blue eyes meeting with Astrid's cold blue ones.

"He's going to be okay," Astrid said in a more calming voice, "I promise you, he's going to be okay."

"Sorry, lad," Gobber muttered before swinging the axe down, the thud of the axe mixing with the boom of thunder before all feel away,

replaced by Hiccup's muffled screams.

Later,

Hours had passed on the open sea, the remaining longships cutting through the waves on their tired journey back to Berk. Hiccup had been taken below deck, the stump of his leg having been bandaged the best it could. The storm had stopped as well and the sun had set, leaving the moon and the starry sky above.

Fishlegs sighed as he looked up at it all before bring his eyes back down to the ship. Glancing towards the prow, he saw Merida where she had been seated most of the voyage, staring wistfully out at the ocean. Fishlegs thought of going over to her, but the thought went out of his head when he felt someone sit beside him. Turning, Fishlegs found his father shifting into a comfortable position next to him. His arm was wrapped in a hastily applied bandage and it looked like he was having trouble moving it.

"Mind if I sit with you, son?" Fishguts questioned.

"Sure thing, Dad," Fishlegs replied, "How's your arm?"

"Been better," Fishguts admitted as he rolled his shoulder and hissed in pain, "Nothing a good mead can't fix. How's your jaw?"

Reaching up, Fishlegs touched his injured jaw with his hand, letting out his own hiss of pain at the stinging that shot through his mouth. At the same time, his tongue moved to the now two vacant spots in his mouth where his teeth had been, tasting his own coppery blood.

"Been better," Fishlegs replied, earning a snort from Fishguts.

"How many teeth did you lose?" Fishguts asked.

"Two," Fishlegs answered.

"Let me see," Fishguts said before gingerly cupping his son's jaw and looking into Fishlegs' mouth, "Not bad. Clean breaks and they were two you could afford to lose. We'll have Gobber fix you up some replacements and you'll be right as rain."

"Thanks, Dad," Fishlegs said with a smile. A silence fell between the two and Fishlegs noticed that his father was working up the courage to say something.

"Sonâ€¦" Fishguts began before trailing off with a sigh, "Son, I wanted toâ€¦I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize?" Fishlegs asked in confusion, "Apologize for what?"

"I've been real rotten to you, son," Fishguts admitted, a look of shame on his face, "I learned a lot today. Mostly that I've been wrong about damn near everything. You were right about the dragons. You were right about Hiccup and Merida. And you were right about where your strengths lie."

"What do you mean?" Fishlegs questioned.

"For years I've wanted you to be nothing but a fierce warrior, I didn't notice that's not who you are," Fishguts explained before chuckling, "Well, not wholly anyway. You're still my son after all."

Fishlegs chuckled as his father continued.

"I saw what you did in that battle," Fishguts continued, "It might have been the strength of your arm and your heart that saved Astrid, but it was the strength of your mind that saved Hiccup and slew the Demon Bear."

"Hiccup killed Mor'du, not me," Fishlegs argued.

"Indeed he did, but he would have been dead if it weren't for you," Fishguts explained, "It was you who saw Mor'du's weakness when the rest of us saw his strength. To everyone else, Mor'du was unbeatable. It was you that saw the chink in his armor."

Fishlegs blushed under his father's praise, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly.

"People will talk for years about how you knocked the Demon Bear off the Red Death's back and smote him into the sea like Thor made flesh," Fishguts continued with a grin, "But me? I will remember when you saw what had been staring us in the face all along and brought an end to the Demon Bear."

Fishguts held his hand up and pointed a finger at his son's forehead.

"This is your strength, Fishlegs," Fishguts stated, "The strongest muscle in your body, sharper than any sword you could carry. You're not a warrior, son. You're a warrior-scholar, like the kings of old."

Lowering his hand, Fishguts placed it on Fishlegs' shoulder.

"I've never been prouder of you, son," Fishguts said with a warm smile, "You showed the world that I was a fool and I've never been prouder. You must get that mind of yours from your mother, because the gods know I'm as dull as a rock."

The two laughed together before a comfortable silence fell between them, Fishguts still resting his hand on Fishlegs' shoulder. As they sat, Meatlug buzzed over to their ship, landing in front of the father and son, startling Fishguts.

"Oh!" he exclaimed in surprise as Meatlug looked up at him, "Umâ€¦helloâ€¦!"

"Dad, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine," Fishlegs said with a chuckle as he indicated towards the Gronckle, "This is Meatlug."

"Umâ€¦hello," Fishguts greeted awkwardly.

"Say hello Meatlug," Fishlegs instructed, prompting the Gronckle to pounce on Fishguts and begin licking ecstatically at his face.

"Ah! Fishlegs!" Fishguts cried out as he tried in vain to get Meatlug off of him, "Get it off me! Get it off me!"

Fishlegs chuckled at the sight, before he turned and his eyes once again fell on the sight of Merida standing at the ship's prow. Standing up, he left his father and his dragon to their own devices and walked across the deck to Merida's side.

"Mind if I join you?" Fishlegs questioned. Merida didn't reply, preferring to stare out at the black sea.

"He's going to be alright, you know," Fishlegs said, trying to break the silence.

"An' where did ye hear 'at, Fishlegs?" Merida snapped, turning to glare at the young man, "In a book?"

"Maybe I did," Fishlegs replied, ignoring the jab as he leaned against the ship's railing and looked out at the sea as well.

"It's ma fault," Merida muttered after a few moments of silence.

"What do you mean?" Fishlegs questioned in confusion.

"Ah mean it's ma fault Hiccup lost his leg," Merida explained, tears welling up in her eyes.

"How could it possibly be your fault, Merida?" Fishlegs asked with concern.

"When we were fallin', he turned sae 'at he was fallin' in front o' me," Merida explained as a few tears fell down her cheeks, "He turned sae he hit th' fire first. 'At's why he lost his leg, because he was protectin' me."

"Merida, you can't blame yourself for that," Fishlegs implored, "That was Hiccup's choice becauseâ€|well becauseâ€|"

"Because he loves me," Merida finished for him, a small smile on her face, "Ah know, he told me. An' Ah love him, which is why Ah can never fergive maself."

"You will in time," Fishlegs assured her, "Once you see that he's alright. And he will be alright. I promise you that."

Merida smiled at the young man before they both turned and looked at the sea again. As they did, Toothless wandered up next to them, resting his forepaws on the railing and looking out over the water. Merida smiled and ran her hand down the Night Fury's black scales.

"We should be getting close to Berk now," Fishlegs observed.

"Good," Merida commented, "After all this, all Ah want tae be is home again."

"So, Berk's home now?" Fishlegs questioned, a smirk on his face. Merida's only reply was to look at him and smile.

As the two talked, Toothless began humming to himself. Listening, Merida smiled as she recognized the song. Looking up at Boudica, who was still sitting on the prow of the ship, her smile growing as the Nadder began to hum as well. Waddling over, Meatlug rested its chin on the railing next to Fishlegs, prompting the young man to pat the Gronckle on the head as it began to hum along. Suddenly, the humming intensified immensely, prompting Fishlegs to look up.

"Merida," Fishlegs said, catching the princess' attention as he pointed upwards, "Look."

Looking up, Merida let out a small gasp as she saw the sky was filled with dragons following the ships. Gronckles, Nadders, Nightmares, Zipplebacks, Terrors, Timberjacks and a whole host of dragons Merida couldn't identify, all filling night sky. And each and every one of them was humming along to Toothless' tune.

The humming caught the attention of the other Vikings and Highlanders as well, drawing their gazes to the sky as the dragons cast shadows over the moon and stars, their song carrying across the breaking waves of the North Sea.

"Wait a minute," Fergus said as he looked up in confusion, "Ah know this song."

Slowly, he brought his gaze back down to the ship, where he saw Merida grab part of the rigging and pull herself up onto the railing, her short red hair whipping in the wind.

"_Ah hear th' mountain birds,_" Merida sang as the dragons began to swoop low over the ships, "_Th' sound o' rivers singin'_. A song Ah've often heard_."

"_It flows through me now,_" Merida continued as a Nightmare began flying next to her, "_Sae clear an' sae loud. Ah stand where Ah am_."

"_An' forever, Ah'm dreamin' o' home,_" Merida sang as she reached out and ran a hand down the Nightmare's neck, causing it to purr, "_Ah feel sae alone_."

"_Ah'm dreaming o' home,_" Merida finished quietly as she looked out of the waters, smiling as she saw the lights of Berk appear on the horizon, a beacon in the dark guiding her home.

A/N: I was so hyped up on your guys' enthusiasm for the last chapter that I managed to bang this chapter out at double speed. I hope you guys liked the climax and the start of the resolution. I've got two more chapters planned and then the end, so I hope guys like how it all wraps up! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

39. Due to the Dead

Chapter 39: Due to the Dead

All was quiet in the house atop the hill that Stoick, Hiccup and Merida lived in. On the first floor, most of the furniture had been moved out of the way to make room for Hiccup's bed, which lay in the

center of the room. Hiccup lay asleep in the bed, blind to the world. Merida sat next to him in a chair, leaning on the bed with his hand clasped in hers. Toothless lay curled up at the foot of the bed and an empty chair sat across from Merida. Merida watched Hiccup with sad eyes letting out a wistful sigh.

A knock came from the front door, followed a moment later by Elinor opening the door and stepping inside. She took a moment to observe the sight before her sadly before putting on her neutral face and stepping forward.

"Th' funeral is taenight," Elinor commented as she stopped next to Merida, looking down at her daughter.

"Ah know, Ma," Merida grumbled, not bothering to look at her mother, "Ah was ane o' th' people who gathered th' bodies."

"Ah know it was a grim task but it was a very honorable thin' tae dae," Elinor said.

"Ah had a trained dragon an' they deserved a proper funeral," Merida explained with a melancholy shrug, "Saemeane had tae collect them. We cudnae leave them tae th' gulls an' th' crabs. Or worse, whatever Vandal are left."

"Aye," Elinor agreed with a nod, before sighing, "Ye know ye are bein' very selfish."

"Selfish?" Merida asked in confusion as she turned to look at her mother, "How am Ah bein' selfish?"

"He's been like this fer days an' ye've been here sun up tae sun doon," Elinor explained, "Saeme other people might want tae spend saeme time with him, ye know."

"There's a chair right over there," Merida said, indicating to the chair as she turned back towards Hiccup, "Nae ane's stoppin' ye."

"'At's nae whit Ah meant, Merida," Elinor sighed.

"Then say whit ye mean, Ma!" Merida snapped, shooting her mother an angry look, "Daenae jist dance around it."

"Ye cannae spend all yer time in here with him," Elinor stated, "It's nae healthy fer ye."

"Ye'd be daein' th' same thin' if it was Da," Merida argued.

"Meridaâ€¦" Elinor began to say but stopped as her daughter turned and looked at her tears welling up in her icy blue eyes.

"Ah cannae leave him, Ma," Merida sniffed, "Nae like this. Ah love him an' he's done sae much fer me. Ah cannae leave him when he's sâ€¦|he's sâ€¦|"

Merida let out a sob, prompting Elinor to sit down on the bed next to her daughter and pull her into a hug, the princess crying into the queen's shoulder as she shushed the young woman soothingly.

"There, there," Elinor said soothingly, "He's gaein' tae be jist fine. Gothi the Elder patched him up nice an' good. All he has tae dae now is rest an' then he'll be right as rain."

"But his footâ€|" Merida began to argue, pulling away to look at her mother.

"Losin' a foot didnae slow doon yer father, now did it?" Elinor questioned, "An' look at 'at blacksmith friend o' yers. He's lost a foot an' a hand, an' he was still oot there battlin' th' Vandal with Stoick an' yer father. Hiccup's gaein' tae be jist fine. He's a strong boy. Ah hae faith in him an' sae shud ye."

"Ah dae hae faith in him," Merida argued.

"Ah know ye dae," Elinor said with a smirk, "Ah know ye love him too. He loves ye as well though an' Ah daenae think he'd like tae know ye've been mopin' around his bed almost th' whole time ye've been back."

"Ah guess ye're right," Merida agreed with a sigh.

"O' course Ah am, now gae ootside an' get saeme fresh air," Elinor said as she stood up, prompting Merida to do the same, "Ah will keep him company."

"Ye promise ye'll come an' find me if he wakes up?" Merida asked as she moved towards the door.

"Ah swear it," Elinor replied, smiling as she sat down in the vacated chair.

"Okay," Merida said with a nod, opening the door before turning her attention to Toothless, "Come on, Toothless, ye need saeme fresh air too."

Toothless hesitated for a moment before getting up and following Merida out the door. Merida smiled at Toothless and pat him on the head as she closed the door behind them. Looking down the hill, she saw the village was abuzz with activity. Dragons were everywhere, sitting on roofs and flying through the skies above the village. Already some of the dragons were bonding with the villagers and Merida even caught sight of some bonding with some Highlanders as well.

"It seems everythin's turned oot fer th' best," Merida said with a sigh as she continued to pet Toothless' head, "Fer th' most part."

As Merida talked with the dragon, Boudica came swooping down from out of the sky, clicking her tongue and nuzzling Merida affectionately, causing the princess to giggle.

"Hello tae ye too, Boudica," Merida greeted, "Ah'm sorry Ah haenae been around 'at much th' past few days. Wud ye care tae take a walk with me an' Toothless?"

The Nadder clicked her tongue in reply, which Merida took for a yes, prompting her to head for the forest with the two dragons in tow. As

they wandered through the woods, Merida let her thoughts wander as well, most of them focusing on Hiccup, the dragons observing the curiosities of the woods as they followed behind her. As such, she wasn't truly paying attention as she walked through some bushes, the sight of what was on the other side giving her sudden pause.

Looming before her were the standing stones, the strange monoliths arranged in a circle just as they had always been. Merida looked back at the forest behind her in confusion before turning forward again.

"But Ah wasnae lost," Merida mused, "Ah know exactly where Ah am."

Merida's expression turned sad as an explanation occurred to her.

"Th' magic must hae died with her," Merida vocalized her thoughts. Before she could think further on the subject, the loud cawing of crows caught her attention. Turning towards the source, she saw someone she was ashamed to have forgotten.

Laying on the cold hard ground was Angus' body where she had left it days ago, though now it felt like an eternity. Despite being surrounded by crows, Angus' body was oddly well preserved, seeming to have suffered almost no decay at all. It was then that Merida noticed that one of the crows stood apart from the others. The crow stood between Angus and the other crows cawing angrily and flapping his wings menacingly at the other birds.

"Off with ye!" Merida shouted as she ran over, throwing her arms around in an effort to scare off the birds, the dragons following her and growling menacingly at the scavengers, "Off with th' lot o' ye!"

The crows cawed in fear and took to the air, scattering into the trees and sky. Merida glared in the direction the birds had gone in before turning her attention to the crow who still sat on the ground, looking up at her.

"Hello, pretty bird," Merida greeted as she leaned down and offered her arm, prompting the crow to hop on and allowing her to lift him up, "'At was a very brave thin' ye did. Thank ye."

The crow shrugged his shoulders before looking around in confusion, a sad look crossing Merida's face as she realized who he was looking for.

"Ah'm sorry," Merida apologized as she ran a finger down the crows back, "She wonae be comin' back."

The crow cawed sadly as his head drooped, Merida continuing to stroke his feathers.

"Ye cud stay with me, if ye'd like?" Merida suggested.

The crow cawed and nodded his head, prompting Merida to smile and place him upon her shoulder. The smile quickly fell away as she looked down at Angus.

"Oh Angus," she moaned, her eyes growing watery, "Look what he's done tae ye."

She kneeled down and began stroking Angus' mane, fighting back sobs. Toothless and Boudica wandered over, Toothless letting out a sad sound as he looked at Angus as Boudica nudged the horse's head with her nose.

"Ah wonae leave ye oot here fer th' buzzards," Merida said resolutely, wiping her tears away, "Ah'll give ye a proper burial. Like you deserve."

Later,

After returning to the village, Merida had quickly recruited her father, Gobber, Will, Andra and their fathers into giving Angus a proper burial while leaving the dragons in the village. The group stood before the stone circle, looking up at it in wonder.

"Ah cannae believe we ne'er knew this was here," Gobber said in awe.

"She was hidin' it with her magic," Merida explained, the crow still sitting on her shoulder.

"Sae, she lived here?" Will questioned.

"She had a little cottage, jist over there," Merida explained, pointing over to the path that led to Hilde's home, "It wasnae much tae look at, but Ah suppose it suited her jist fine."

"All this time, she was wanderin' around these woods an' we ne'er knew," Gobber stated, shaking his head in amazement.

"Ah think we had better focus on th' task at hand," Fergus spoke up, indicating towards Angus' body lying before them.

"Whit are we gaein' tae dae with him?" Lord MacGuffin questioned.

"We're gaein' tae bury him," Merida answered morosely.

"Aye, but where?" Lord Macintosh asked.

"Ah know a place," Gobber commented enigmatically, before motioning for the others to help him place Angus on the large litter they had constructed and brought with him. Though the horse was big and heavy, the large men managed to lift Angus' bulk between them and went marching back into the woods, Merida trailing behind.

After a short walk, they came to another clearing. Tall grass and wildflowers covered the clearing as well as a few piles of rocks. One pile at the center of the clearing stood out amongst the others, its uniform shape and wooden marker indicating what it was.

"A grave?" Will questioned in confusion as they put Angus down next to the pile, the young lord leaning down to read the marker, "Here lies Gwendolin." Who was Gwendolin?"

"Ma mother," Gobber stated simply, causing everyone's eyes to go

wide.

"Oh Gobberâ€|" Merida said sadly as she reached out and touched the blacksmith's arm.

"It's alright, Princess," Gobber replied with a sad smile, "She's been dead an' buried fer years an' Ah came tae terms with it all saeme time ago."

"Gwendolin," Lord Macintosh said pensively, rubbing his chin as he thought, "Ahâ€|Ah knew a Gwendolin ance upon a time."

"Will," he said, turning towards his son and holding out his hand, "'At medallion ye said Gobber gave ye, give it here."

Nodding, Will reached into his pouch and retrieved the medallion before handing it to his father. Dangling the medallion in front of his face, Lord Macintosh studied it intently before a look of shock and surprise crossed his face.

"Ah'll be damned," Macintosh muttered before lowering his hand, a faraway look in his eyes.

"Whit?" Fergus pressed, "Whit is it?"

"Ah knew this woman," Macintosh said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeâ€|Ye knew ma mother?" Gobber questioned.

"When Ah was jist a little boy, Ah had a nanny," Lord Macintosh explained, "She was a distant cousin or saeme such. Her name was Gwendolin an' she wore this medallion. She said it use tae belong tae her mother."

Gobber looked on in shock as Lord Macintosh related the information.

"Whit happened tae her?" Lord MacGuffin questioned.

"There was raid," Macintosh recalled, the memories flooding his mind, "Vikin's from th' sea. They had been raidin' th' villages fer weeks an' had grown bold enough tae attack our home, broke intae th' castle. Ah remember th' screamin' and shoutin' as Gwendolin brought me tae ma room. She put me inside an' told me nae tae come oot until she came an' got me. But when she turned tae leave, he was standin' there."

"Who was?" Will asked.

"A Vikin' man," Lord Macintosh explained, "Tall an' broad, with straw blonde hair an' cold blue eyes. Gwendolin screamed as he reached down an' scooped her up withoot a word. As he turned tae leave, Ah tried tae stop him but Ah was a boy o' six an' he batted me aside like Ah was naethin'. 'At was th' last Ah saw o' herâ€|but nae th' last o' him."

"Whit dae ye mean?" Merida asked.

"Ah ne'er fergot 'at man," Lord Macintosh said, a cold look crossing

his face, "Ah hated him fer whit he'd done and ma hate anly grew as Ah aged an' learned jist whit he must hae done with Gwendolin. Then, when Ah was sixteen, another raid came an' he was at th' castle again. Ma heart stopped when Ah found him, Ah knew him instantly, though Ah daenae believe he ever knew me. He fought me all th' same though, but he was ten years slower an' Ah was ten years stronger with steel in ma hand an' fire in ma guts."

"Whit did ye dae?" Gobber questioned.

"Ah put steel in his guts," Lord Macintosh said, turning to look Gobber in the eye, "Ah'm sorry, but Ah believe Ah killed yer father."

"Daenae worry about it," Gobber said darkly as he waved his hand dismissively before turning to look at his mother's grave.

"Ye know whit this means though, daenae ye?" Will questioned, "Ye're ane o' us, a Macintosh, a clansman."

"Ah suppose Ah am," Gobber said with a smirk and a nod, "But 'at's neither here nor there at th' moment."

"He's right," Fergus agreed, "We hae a job tae dae. Get some rocks, lads. Nae horse wants tae be buried in th' earth."

With that, the men went about gathering rocks from around the clearing and piling them around Angus' body until the horse was completely covered. As they finished, Gobber took a marker he had brought with him and planted it in the stone pile before taking a knife and carving "Here lies Angus," in the wood.

"Shud we say a few words?" Lord MacGuffin questioned.

"Ah will," Merida said sadly as she stepped forward, her hands clasped together, "Ah'm sorry, Angus. It shudnae hae been this way."

Wiping a tear from her eye, she took a breath before continuing.

"May th' road rise tae meet ye," she intoned, "May th' wind always be at yer back. May th' sun shine warm upon yer face. May th' rain fall softly upon yer fields until we meet again."

Stepping forward, Merida leaned down and pressed her lips against Angus' name before resting her head against the wooden marker.

"Ah'm gaein' tae miss ye, Angus," she whispered before she sobbed quietly as a tear ran down her face, the crow on her shoulder rubbing his head against her cheek in an effort to comfort her.

"Ah think it's time fer us tae head back, lass," Fergus said, prompting Merida to straighten up and nod her head. Turning around, she wiped the tears from her eyes as she walked over to her father's side, Fergus putting a comforting hand on his daughter's shoulder. As the group began to make their way into the woods, Will paused and turned back towards the graves.

"Whit are ye daein', lad?" Lord Macintosh questioned.

"Jist makin' saeme proper adjustments," Will said as he drew a knife from his belt and began carving at Gwendolin's gravemarker. After a moment, he wiped away the sawdust before smiling and nodding at his handiwork.

"There," Will stated as he stood up, "Now it's correct."

With that, he turned and followed his father into the woods, leaving the two graves alone in the clearing, the marker above Gobber's mother now reading, "Here lies Gwendolin of Clan Macintosh."

Later,

Evening had fallen over Berk as people and dragons gathered near the edge of the village. A massive pyre had been built before them and the bodies of all those who had died in the battle at the Nest lay upon it. Merida stood with her parents and brothers at the forefront of the group, Stoick standing to their side. Gothi was already in front of them, leading the village in prayer as she slowly walked around the pyre, setting the dry wood alight with the torch she carried.

As the villagers recited the familiar funeral prayer, Merida looked up at Stoick. Bags hung under his eyes from lack of sleep and his hair looked unkempt. Merida wasn't sure if he had slept since they had gotten back. Every night he was awake when she went to sleep and he was still awake when she awoke the next day. If there was anyone who was struggling with Hiccup's condition as much as she was it was Stoick.

Silently, Elinor watched her daughter as the pyre burnt before them, a worried look on her face. She had to do something to help Merida, but she couldn't think of what. Absent minded scanning the crowd, her eyes fell on Astrid standing with her mother. Seeing the young woman caused a thought to pop into her head. As the prayer ended and the villagers began to depart, Elinor moved through the crowd towards Astrid.

"Good evenin'," Elinor said as she stepped in front of Astrid and her mother, the two women looking at the queen in surprise as she appeared in front of them, "Astrid was it?"

"Uh yes, Your uh Highness," Astrid mumbled, "Is there something that I can help you with?"

"Yes, well, nae me," Elinor explained, "Yer friends with ma daughter, are ye nae?"

"I'd like to think so," Astrid replied with a small smile.

"'At's good tae hear," Elinor stated with a smile of her own, "Merida ne'er had any other girls her own age around when she was growin' up. It's nice tae see she's gained 'at here."

Astrid's smile grew as her mother placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled down at her daughter.

"As ye may hae noticed, she hasnae beenâ€|herself since ye all came

back," Elinor continued as she wrung her hands together nervously.

"Sheâ€|took what happened to Hiccup pretty hard," Astrid agreed, "Fishlegs was telling me that she blames herself for it."

"'At sounds like saemethin' ma Merida wud dae," Elinor said with a sigh, "Ah was hopin' 'at ye might be able tae talk tae her. Find a way tae cheer her up perhaps?"

"I'm not sure that's a great idea, Your Highness," Astrid said nervously, "Merida and I are friends now, sure, but we had a kind of rocky start and we don't always see eye to eye on things."

"Please," Elinor begged, "There must be saemethin' ye can dae. Ah hate seeing her like this. Ah feel she needs her friends now more than ever."

Astrid bit her lip as she looked over at Merida, who stood watching the funeral pyre burn, a morose look on her face as she stroked the crow on her shoulder's black feathers. Turning back to Elinor, Astrid nodded her head.

"I'll see what I can do," Astrid stated, bringing a smile to Elinor's face.

A short while later, Merida was making her way up the hill towards the house alone. The rest of the village had gone to the Great Hall to feast to the dead, but Merida was in no mood for feasts. She was in no mood for much of anything anymore. The sound of the crow on her shoulder letting out a caw brought her attention back to reality and drew her attention to the sound of approaching footsteps. Turning, Merida saw Astrid and Ruffnut making their way up the hill towards her.

"Hey Red," Ruff greeted jovially, "I like your bird."

Ruff reached out to touch the crow, which cawed angrily and snapped its beak at the girl, who quickly pulled her hand back and glared at the crow.

"Whit are ye two daein' here?" Merida asked in confusion, "Daenae ye both live in other parts o' th' village?"

"Yeah," Astrid said with a shrug, "We were, uh, looking for you."

"Did ma mother put ye up tae this?" Merida asked, narrowing her eyes at the other girls.

"Wow, she figured that one out quick," Ruff mumbled, prompting Astrid to hit her on the shoulder.

"Look, Ah know ma mother means well but Ah daenae need tae be babied," Merida said sternly before she turned around and began to walk away.

"Merida, we're not trying to baby you," Astrid pleaded as she jogged in front of the Highlander girl, "We're your friends, and we're worried about you."

"Ah'm fine," Merida snapped, "There ain't anythin' tae be worried about."

"You spend all your time by Hiccup's bedside," Astrid argued, "You look miserable whenever I see you."

"Well, maybe because Ah am miserable!" Merida growled, "How wud ye feel if it were Fishlegs unconscious fer near a week!?"

"Wait, what does Fishlegs have to do with this?" Ruff questioned in confusion.

"Not now!" Astrid snapped at Ruff before turning back to Merida, "I'm not trying to say you shouldn't be miserable. We're all upset that he's like that. What I'm trying to say is you shouldn't wallow in it like you have been."

Merida said nothing, preferring to look at her feet.

"Look, I'm guessing your mom already said something like this to you but still," Astrid pressed, "Do you really think Hiccup would want to see you like this?"

Merida slowly raised her head, looking at Astrid for a moment before sighing.

"Nae, Ah suppose he wudnae," Merida said while shaking her head, "Whit dae ye suggest then?"

"Come hang out with us," Astrid replied with a smile and a shrug.

"Hang oot?" Merida questioned.

"Yeah, we're friends, aren't we?" Astrid asked, her smile falling slightly.

"Aye, we are," Merida replied a small smile on her face.

"Well then come hang out with us," Astrid repeated with a bigger smile, "I mean none of us have be able to just hang since dragon training started."

"Feels like forever ago," Ruff commented.

"Aye," Merida agreed with a nod, "Where are we gaein' then?"

"My house," Astrid answered before grabbing Merida's hand and pulling the princess along as she made her way back down the hill, "Follow me."

A short while later, the three young women sat in Astrid's house, a few candles and a fire in the fireplace providing illumination to the parlor they sat in. The girls sat on the floor facing one another. Merida's crow had hopped off of her shoulder and was taking the opportunity to look around the room. Smiling, Astrid held her hand out to the bird, which walked over to her, allowing the blonde to run her fingers across its feathers.

"Oh, but you like her," Ruff commented crossly, "I see how it is."

"I'm sure he'll grow to like you too, Ruff," Astrid chuckled, "You're a bit of an acquired taste."

Ruff rolled her eyes at the joke before turning to look at Merida.

"The Red Death sure did a number on your hair, huh?" Ruff commented, looking at the blackened ends of Merida's now much shorter hair.

"It's jist hair," Merida replied with a shrug, "It will grow back."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you have to look like an ogre until then," Ruff said as she scooted behind Merida while drawing her knife, "Here, let me take a crack at it."

"Wait, whit are ye daein'?" Merida asked, suddenly startled and worried.

"Relax, I know what I'm doing," Ruff said, twirling the knife in her fingers and grabbing lightly onto Merida's hair

"She actually does," Astrid added as she watched Ruff begin slicing off pieces of Merida's hair with her knife, "She's the one who taught me how to braid my hair. Still does some times."

"Yeah, you should have seen her when we were little," Ruff commented with a snort of laughter as she continued cutting off chunks of Merida's hair, "Little Camicazi with her hair sticking out in every direction. Hilarious."

"Wait, Camicazi?" Merida questioned in confusion as she leaned her head back to give Ruff better access to her hair, "Who's Camicazi?"

The crow let out a frightened squawk as he flew to the other side of the room. Merida looked over at Astrid in confusion before she saw the blonde giving Ruff the coldest glare imaginable.

"Wait, you don't know?" Ruff questioned, pointing at Merida with her knife, seemingly oblivious to Astrid's glare.

"Ruff," Astrid snapped, her hands clenched into shaking fists.

"You never told her?" Ruff asked, pointing her knife at Astrid.

"No I never told her," Astrid replied heatedly, "I kind of liked the fact that one person on this island didn't know that."

"Know whit?" Merida asked in confusion before realization dawned on her, "Wait, Astridâ€|are ye Camicazi?"

Astrid groaned and buried her face in her hands before nodding her head.

"Ah thought yer name wasâ€|well Astrid," Merida observed, still

trying to put all the pieces together.

"It is," Astrid said with a sigh as she lifted her head and looked at Merida, "My full name is Camicazi Astrid Hofferson."

"Oh," Merida stated, "Why dae ye gae by yer middle name?"

"Did you hear that name?" Astrid asked incredulously, "Camicazi? Really? It's the dumbest name. It was my grandmother's name or something so now I'm stuck with it."

"She got people to stop by beating up anyone who called her that," Ruff explained as she continued to trim Merida's hair, the princess giggling at her friends antics.

"Something tells me I might need to reintroduce that policy," Astrid threatened, eyeing Ruff dangerously.

"Sae if Camicazi was yer grandmother's name, where does Astrid come from?" Merida inquired.

"Ah'll show ye," Astrid said an excited smile crossing her face as she stood up while Ruff let out an exasperated groan.

"Really?" Ruff questioned, snipping some hair from the front of Merida's head as Astrid walked to the mantle of the fireplace.

"She doesn't know this, so I'm totally allowed to tell her it," Astrid replied defensively as she took a woodcarving off the mantle and brought it over before handing it to Merida. Merida looked down at the woodcarving of the ancient warrior.

"Who is this?" Merida questioned, looking at Astrid for elaboration.

"This is Asterix of Gaul," Astrid gushed, an excited look on her face, "He's an ancestor of mine through my father, my gods only know how many times great grandfather. He's said to have been one of the strongest men to ever live after he drank a magic potion given to him by a druid. That's where I get my strength from, his bloodline, only he was like, a hundred times stronger than I'll ever be."

"Wait, Ah think Ah've heard o' him," Merida commented, tapping her chin pensively, "He fought th' Great Empire, right?"

"He did!" Astrid grinned, "How did you know?"

"Ane o' my best friends is th' Princess o' Corona, which is located where Gaul use tae be," Merida explained, smiling along with Astrid, "He's a folk hero there along with Saint Joan."

"Saint Joan?" Ruff questioned as she began braiding Merida's hair.

"Th' Lady Knight?" Merida provided, glancing back at Ruff, "Ye've ne'er heard o' her?"

"Can't say that I have," Ruff answered, "Who was she?"

"She was a farm girl who managed tae train herself in combat an'

become a knight," Merida explained, "They say 'at she was guided by Lord Soliel himself an' she went on all sorts o' adventures, fightin' villains an' rightin' wrongs. She's even supposed tae hae led Corona in a war."

"I get the feeling you like her," Astrid observed with a snicker.

"She's ane o' ma personal heroes, second anly tae Queen Boudica herself," Merida replied, "Ah'm guessin' Ah like her as much as ye like Asterix."

"I highly doubt it," Ruff snarked, "Though I've been dealing with her talking about the Gaul for years."

Astrid waved her hand dismissively at Ruff.

"Anyway, Astrid comes from a kind of feminization of his name," Astrid summed up as she brought the woodcarving back to the mantel, "So, that answers your question."

"Done," Ruffnut said, standing up and stepping back from Merida with her hands up. Turning back, Astrid's eyes widened as she looked at Ruff's handiwork.

"Oh wow Ruff," Astrid said as she stepped forward to get a better look at Merida.

"Whit? Whit did she dae?" Merida asked, a hint of panic in her voice, her hands hovering around her head, too afraid to touch her hair, "How does it look? Good? Bad? Ah swear, Ruff, if ye shaved meâ€|"

"Wow Red, do you really have that low of an opinion of me?" Ruff questioned.

"Hold on," Astrid said before running off before quickly returning with a looking glass. Looking into it, Merida let out a small gasp at what she saw. Ruff had cut off the burnt ends of Merida's hair and had trimmed down the hair at the front of her head that had still hung long. Ruff had knotted Merida's hair into a high ponytail at the back of her head the remaining length so short it only fell to the base of her skull. In knotting Merida's hair, Ruff had pulled it back so much that the red locks looked straight for the first time in her life. The only curl that remained was a strand that fell between her eyes and hung out over her nose.

"Oh wow Ruff," Merida echoed Astrid's earlier sentiments, "This isâ€|"

"The best I could do on such short notice," Ruff cut her off with a shrug, "I could try again some other time, if you'd like?"

"Ah'd love 'at," Merida said, turning around and embracing Ruff, the other girl caught off guard for a moment before returning the hug.

"Well, aren't you two just the cutest," Astrid joked from the side, only for both Ruff and Merida to reach out and grab Astrid before pulling her into the hug as well.

"Thank ye both sae much," Merida said as she continued to hug the other girls, "Ah really did need this."

"Hey, no worries, Red," Ruff replied, "That's what friends are for."

Their attention was brought to the door as it opened and Bertha stepped through, a bemused smile on her face as she observed the scene before her.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Bertha commented with a chuckle.

"Nae, we we're probably jist aboot tae leave actually," Merida replied, "It's getting' late an' me an' Ruff shud be headin' home."

"Alright then," Bertha nodded in agreement, smilingly at her daughter as she noticed the change in Merida's demeanor.

"Thanks for coming over," Astrid said as she walked the two to the door.

"Thanks fer hain' us," Merida replied as she stepped out of the door, a mischievous smile forming on her face as she turned back towards Astrid, "See ye tomorrow, Cami."

Astrid groaned in disgust as Ruff let out a chortle.

"Whatever," Astrid grumbled before sneering at Merida, "See you tomorrow, Merry."

Merida merely rolled her eyes as she began to walk away, her crow flying after her and landing on her shoulder. Ruff meanwhile had a look on indignant shock on her face.

"So what, I say you're name and get threatened with violence, but she does it and all she gets a bad nickname?" Ruff questioned, "Totally not fair."

"Whatever Ruff," Astrid replied, "Go kill the Red Death and then come talk to me."

"Lame," was Ruff's only replied as she turned and began walking away, waving at Astrid as the young woman stepped back into her house and closed the door. Jogging a bit to catch up with her, Ruff fell in step next to Merida as the climbed the hill to their homes.

"So, Red," Ruff began awkwardly, drawing Merida's attention to her, "Mind if I ask you some questions about that cute friend of yours, Will?"

"Oh, Ruff, nae," Merida groaned in reply.

Meanwhile,

Near the center of the village, smoke continued to rise from Gobber's smithy, despite the late hour. Inside, Gobber was beating on a piece of iron with his hammer hand, the fires from the forge illuminating

the building. Hearing a knock at the door, Gobber grumbled angrily before putting his tongs down and marching towards the door.

"Fer th' last time ye stupid flying potato," Gobber shouted as he grabbed the door and wrenched it open, "Buzzâ€|"

Gobber's voice died as he saw Maudie standing before him, a look of shock on her face.

"â€|off," Gobber finished lamely before he quickly tried to recompose himself, "Maudie! Ah, uh, Ah didnaeâ€|ye seeâ€|"

"Is this a bad time, Gobber?" Maudie questioned.

"Nae!" Gobber shouted, causing Maudie to jump and the blacksmith to cringe, "Ah mean nae, it's jist, there's been this Gronckle buzzin' about an' he keeps knockin' against ma door fer saeme reason an'â€|.wud ye like tae come in?"

"Certainly," Maudie answered with a small smile, stepping into the smithy as Gobber held the door open for her.

"Sorry about th'â€|th' mess," Gobber said as he looked around at the state of his shop, "It's naeâ€|okay, well it is always like this."

Maudie giggled as she looked around the shop.

"Ye're up rather late," she observed, "Ah could hear ye workin' from th' other side o' th' village. Whit are ye workin' on?"

"Uhâ€|wellâ€|" Gobber hesitated for a moment, "Maybe it's better if Ah show ye."

Walking over to the anvil, Gobber picked up what he had been working on and held it up for Maudie to see. It appeared to a prosthetic foot, with a basket to hold the end of the leg and straps to keep it secured.

"Ye built a peg leg oot o' iron," Maudie observed, "Fer Hiccup, Ah imagine."

"Aye," Gobber confirmed as he put the peg leg back on the anvil, "He's gaein' tae need ane after all an' fer some reason a wooden ane jist didnae seem tae fit him, if ye know whit Ah mean."

"Ah believe Ah dae," Maudie agreed with a nod.

"Knowin' 'at boy, he'll probably design an even better ane 'at will let him jump clear over a mountain or saemethin' like 'at," Gobber said with a weak laughed that devolved into a sigh.

"Ye're worried about him," Maudie observed.

"Well o' course Ah'm worried about him, he's ma apprentice," Gobber replied before hesitating "An' he'sâ€|"

"He's th' son ye ne'er had," Maudie finished for him, a smirk on her face.

"How did ye know Ah was gaein' tae say 'at?" Gobber questioned.

"Because Ah too hae help raise a child 'at wasnae mine," Maudie stated, "Daenae ye think Ah feel th' same way aboot th' Princess an' her brothers?"

"Ah suppose ye wud," Gobber answered.

"Ah heard ye were th' ane who had tae amputate Hiccup's foot," Maudie said, walking over and laying a hand on Gobber's arm, "'At must hae been difficult fer you."

"It was, but Ah was th' best ane fer th' job," Gobber explained, "Ah cudnae let Stoick dae it, both me an' the King cud see he wasnae in his right mind. He might hae botched it."

Gobber hesitated, rubbing the stump where his hand had been.

"Plus, Ah have experience with this sort o' thing," Gobber finished.

"Th' King said it was very brave o' ye," Maudie stated, "Even he cud see whit ye felt fer Hiccup. He said Hiccup wud hae died if it weren't fer ye."

"Ah doubt a king wud be sayin' such nice things aboot me," Gobber said dismissively.

"Are ye namin' me a liar?" Maudie questioned, taking a step back and planting her hands on her hips, glaring at Gobber.

"N-Nae, nae at all!" Gobber quickly back pedaled.

"Good," Maudie replied, crossing her arms, "He also said ye figured oot whit part o' th' Highlands ye come from, 'at ye're part o' Clan Macintosh."

"Seems like Ah am," Gobber replied with a nod.

"Did ye ever think o' visitin'?" Maudie asked.

"Huh?" Gobber questioned.

"Th' Highlands? Did ye ever think o' visitin'?" Maudie elaborated, "Didnae ye ever want tae see yer mother's homeland?"

"Ah suppose sae," Gobber stated with a sigh, "But Ah jist canae up an' leave. Ah-Ah hae responsibilities here."

"Ah'm sure th' chief will be willin' tae make an exception fer ane o' his auldest friends and th' savior o' his son," Maudie pushed, a smile on her face, "Besides, with nae more dragons tae fight, ye're probably nae gaein' tae be makin' quite as many weapons as ye ance were."

"Hey now, Ah daenae jist make weapons," Gobber argued weakly, "Saemetimes Ah make armor. An' nails, everyane needs nails."

"'At they dae," Maudie replied with a giggle, "But Ah'm sure this is more important than a few nails."

"Aye, ye're probably right," Gobber relented, "How wud Ah gae aboot gettin' tae th' Highlands then?"

"Well, Ah jist sae happen tae know 'at a few ships are leavin' fer th' Highlands in a few days' time," Maudie said knowingly, "Ane is even headed towards Macintosh lands."

"Ah suppose 'at wud dae," Gobber replied, smiling as he crossed his arms and leaned against his work bench, "Tae bad Ah'd be in a strange land all by ma lonesome."

"Well, ye wudnae hae tae be," Maudie stated playfully, "Ah've always wanted tae visit Macintosh lands an' haein' a strappin' young clansman tae show me around wud be a treat."

"Hey now, Ah might be a clansman, but Ah daenae know ma way around ma homeland all 'at well," Gobber argued with a smile on his face, "We're liable tae get lost."

"Ah think ye'll find th' Highlands are an excellent place tae get lost in," Maudie said suggestively as she walked to the smithy door and opened it.

"Aye, Ah'm sure they are," Gobber replied with a grin.

"Then it's settled," Maudie said as she looked at the blacksmith with half-lidded eyes, "Good night, Gobber."

"Good night, Maudie," Gobber replied as Maudie smiled at him and closed the door. Gobber watched the door for a moment before letting out a contented sigh, a smile growing on his features that threatened to split his face.

"Ye've still got it, Gobber auld boy," Gobber said to himself as he moved to douse the furnace for the night, "Ye've still got it."

Meanwhile,

Merida smiled as she entered the house, her crow seated on her shoulder. Her face fell slightly as she observed the scene before her. A low fire burned in the fireplace, casting long shadows across the room. Hiccup still lay in bed, still as oblivious to the world as he had been that morning. Stoick sat snoozing in the chair across the bed from her, snoring softly while Toothless lay curled up at the foot of the bed.

"Well, Ah'm glad 'at he's getting' saeme sleep," Merida whispered to herself as she closed the door and slipped off her boots. Padding barefoot through the house, she retrieved a blanket before draping it over Stoick, who shifted slightly in his chair before snoring again. Merida smiled before turning back to Hiccup.

As she moved towards the bed, her crow leapt from her shoulder before finding a shelf nearby where he could roost for the night. Merida quietly slipped off her vest and tossed it to the side. Lifting the blanket, Merida crawled into bed with Hiccup, resting her head on his

shoulder as she wrapped her arms around him.

"Ah miss ye, Hic," Merida whispered as she leaned up and kissed Hiccup on the cheek before settling in to sleep, "Wherever ye are, please, come back tae me."

A/N: Thanks for all your guys' feedback on the last chapter. I hope you liked this one, mostly dedicated to tying up loose ends and playing characters off one another. I hope you all like it! As always, feedback and critiques are always welcome so please review! Later!

40. Touched by Fire

****Chapter 40: Touched by Fire****

All Hiccup could remember was the fire and the pain, then oblivion. He didn't know how long he spent in that dark nothingness, as time had lost all meaning. All he knew was that he wasn't there anymore.

Not that he knew where here was at the moment.

Hiccup stood in a vast emptiness made of grey, swirling fog. It seemed to go on infinitely in every direction, even down. Despite this, Hiccup felt like he was standing on solid ground and felt no fear of falling. Hiccup took a few moments to look around, failing to find anyone or anything in the great emptiness.

"Hello?" Hiccup called out. The air was still for a moment before Hiccup's voice suddenly came echoing back. At first it was whisper soft but grew and grew into a thunderous noise, almost as if a hundred different voices were calling out to him at a hundred different volumes. Hiccup cringed and covered his ears, trying to keep the deafening noise out. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the voices all stopped, prompting Hiccup to lower his hands and look around in confusion.

"Hello," a voice said from behind Hiccup, causing the young man to jump in surprise. Spinning around, Hiccup was surprised by what he saw. Floating in front of him was a floating, twisting ball of orange and red flame twice as big as he was, though the ball seemed to expand and shrink from moment to moment. Tongues of flame circled the ball and licked at the grey fog that surrounded it.

Hiccup gasped in surprise as he stumbled back, almost tripping over his own feet.

"No need to be frightened," a cultured voice emanating from the ball of flame said, "I'm not going to hurt you."

"W-What are you?" Hiccup questioned in shock and fear.

"I am a spirit," the fireball replied, turning slightly, similar to a person cocking their head, "You are familiar with the term, yes?"

"Yes," Hiccup answered, nodding dumbly, "I've seen wisps before."

"I'm afraid that wisps are entirely different sort of animal compared to me, Hiccup," the fireball answered with an ethereal chuckle.

"Youâ€|you know me name?" Hiccup questioned, surprised.

"Oh yes, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third," the fireball answered, "I know all your names. The old and the new."

"What do you mean, all my names?" Hiccup asked in confusion.

"There are those who used to call you Hiccup the Useless, did they not?" the spirit questioned. Hiccup nodded sadly in reply.

"Worry not, that name is dead and will soon be lost to the mists of time," the spirit stated sympathetically, "I know other names as well. Son says your father, little fish said the Demon Bear, Siegfriedson said the Red Death. And there is quite the fetching creature that calls you Hic for short."

Hiccup smiled at the thought of Merida and the compliment the spirit had paid her.

"I can see what they will call you as well," the spirits went on, "Bearslayer, Nightflyer, Hiccup Dragonrider."

"You seem to know a lot about me," Hiccup observed, "Can't say I know a lot about you. What's your name, spirit?"

"I too have many names," the spirit said with a chuckle before it became a stream of fire that danced around Hiccup.

"The Ancients called me Prometheus, Bringer of Fire" the spirit explained, his voice changing, laced with an accent Hiccup didn't recognize as the fire condensed into a human shape. It was a man, tall and muscular but slim, with bronze skin and short, red curly hair. He wore an orange colored toga wrapped around him, the ends of which trailed flames. He held a hand out and a flame appeared in his palm.

"The Great Empire called me Vulcan, Smith of the Gods!" the spirit declared boisterously, his voice deep and raspy as he changed shape again. He now appeared as a giant stout, hairy man with a tangled red beard and wild red hair. He wore a black apron and stood before an anvil, beating on a sword with a large blacksmith's hammer, sparks flying all around him.

"Far to the east, I am called Agni, the Link Between the Worlds," the spirit said in a different accent as his form changed yet again. Now he appeared as a handsome young man with bright red skin and long black hair, dressed in an orange vest with no shirt and loose fitting pants. He had four arms, in one he held a sword, in the other a scroll, while the remaining two hands held a flickering flame between them.

"But you, Hiccup Dragonrider," the spirit said as it became a swirling ball of flame once more, slowly taking another human shape, "You know me by a different name."

In a flash, the flames stopped moving and a man stood before Hiccup. He was tall and slim, similar to Hiccup with pale white skin and bright red hair that he wore swept back from his face. He wore a black colored tunic under dark orange coat that hung to the back of his calves. The coat had red lining and the ends of it trailed tongues of flame. In addition, wore red pants and dark leather boots. He smirked at Hiccup, mischief in his gold colored eyes.

"Loki," Hiccup whispered in shock.

"I see my reputation precedes me," the spirit, Loki, said with a chuckle.

"Y-You're not a spirit," Hiccup accused, "You're a god!"

"Call me what you wish, Hiccup Dragonrider," Loki said with bemusement, "It was your kind that bestowed such titles on my brethren and I. We made no such claims."

"Brethren?" Hiccup asked in confusion.

"Surely if you name me a god, you name others as well?" Loki said, before flinging his hands to the side, causing flames to appear before him which quickly took the shape of a roaring, muscular man with long hair and wielding a hammer, "You know my brother, Thor."

"Of course," Hiccup agreed.

"Well the Ancients use to call him Zeus," Loki explained as the image shifted to a roaring muscular man dressed in a toga wielding a lightning bolt.

"While in the east, he is known as Raiden," Loki continued, the image changing again to a roaring muscular man wearing a wide brimmed hat and shooting lightning from his fingers.

"So, all these different gods in all these different cultures," Hiccup surmised, "They're just all worshipping the same spirits?"

"Precisely," Loki replied as he dismissed the fire image, "Such a keen mind, one of the many things I like about you."

"What do you mean, one of the things?" Hiccup questioned.

"I've been watching you for some time now, Bearslayer," Loki explained as he began to circle Hiccup, "I may not be a god, but I still pay attention to those who pray to me."

Loki stopped in front of Hiccup, crouching down so he rested his elbows on his knees, steeping his hands in front of his face.

"Imagine my surprise when I found you, years ago," Loki stated, "You had just lost your mother I believe, and you had started as a blacksmith's apprentice. They told you not to pray to me, but you wanted to anyway. I was the god of blacksmith's after all, and you wanted to be good at something for once."

"Did you make me good at it?" Hiccup questioned.

"No," Loki replied with a snort, "Don't doubt your own skill, Nightflyer. You were going to be a great blacksmith whether I listened to you or not."

Loki smiled and straightened up before continuing.

"What gave me pause was the other reason you came to me," Loki explained, "Do you remember?"

"Noâ€¦I can't say that I do," Hiccup replied, scratching the back of his head as he looked up at Loki.

"You thought I was lonely," Loki said, a bemused smile on his face, "Here you are, this little speck of a boy on this tiny island in the vast world, and you come to speak to me, who you think is a god, because you think I am lonesome."

Loki reached down and cupped Hiccup's chin, smiling down at the young man.

"Here was a boy from a warrior culture, descended from a great king of old, and instead of being a brash and foolish, he was thoughtful and intelligent. If that's not something special, I don't know what is," Loki said with a chuckle before he crossed his arms behind his back and began to pace around Hiccup again, "So, I watched you and helped where I could. A well stoked fire here, a dash of inspiration there and suddenly you were riding dragons and getting engaged to princesses."

"You speak as if you had a small amount of power in the world," Hiccup observed.

"Because we do," Loki replied with a shrug, "At least, not as much power as your kind like to ascribe to us."

"Why not?" Hiccup questioned, "Why would everyone know about you if you're not that powerful?"

"Once upon a time, we were that powerful," Loki explained, a faraway look in his golden eyes, "We shaped the very fabric of your world and bent it to our whims."

"What happened?" Hiccup asked, intrigued.

"One of our kind provedâ€¦less agreeable than the rest of us," Loki elaborated, "He was also one of the most powerful. It took everything we had to just seal him away, and in doing so, we cut ourselves off from the material world. That is why I must speak with you here."

"I've been meaning to ask you that," Hiccup said, looking around at the swirling gray mass of fog, "Where is here, exactly?"

"Here," Loki stated as he placed a finger against his temple, "Is in here."

"We're inside my head?" Hiccup questioned in confusion.

"We are inside the mind of everyone and everything," Loki explained, "This is the Great Collective Unconscious."

"What is that?" Hiccup asked, lifting his arm to run his hand through some of the grey fog.

"The culmination of life's thoughts, memories, dreamsâ€|" Loki trailed off, peering into the fog, prompting Hiccup to follow his gaze, seeing something move through the swirling cloud for the briefest of moments, "â€|And fears."

"We should not linger in this place," Loki stated, looking slightly worried.

"But I just got here," Hiccup argued.

"It may seem like that to you but your body has been asleep for days," Loki explained.

"What!?" Hiccup shouted in shock, "Days!?"

"Indeed," Loki answered with a nod, "And the body does not care to dwell so long without the mind."

Looking around, Hiccup noticed the fog around them was beginning to swirl and shift, seeming to spin around them.

"What's happening!?" Hiccup shouted as a strange wind began to howl as the fog swirled faster and faster.

"You're waking up," Loki surmised as he observed the swirling fog around them, apparently undaunted by what he saw, "Our time together grows short."

Turning to Hiccup, he grabbed the young man's shoulder to bring the Viking's attention to him.

"Heed my words, Hiccup, Son of Stoick," Loki said seriously, Hiccup's attention entirely focused on the spirit before him, "A shadow rises in the east. My dark cousin seeks release as he did a thousand years ago and a thousand years before that. Do you remember how I told you my brethren were cut off from the material world?"

Hiccup nodded his head, squinting his eyes and holding up his hands to shield himself against the whipping winds. A strange tingling began to encompass his left foot.

"There is one who still walks the Mortal Plane," Loki explained, "He is the youngest of us and came into being after the rest of us were shunted from your world."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Hiccup questioned, his beginning to sting with pain.

"The spirits of light and dark plan against one another and the young spirit is the key to the shadow's plans," Loki elaborated, smirking "He thinks he sees all the pieces of this game in front of him, but he doesn't. There's one he doesn't see."

"What's that!?" Hiccup asked, his leg now searing with pain.

"You," Loki said simply.

Hiccup let out a cry of anguish as he collapsed to his knees, gripping his left leg.

"What's happening!?" Hiccup begged, tears of pain stinging his eyes.

"Let me help you!" Loki said, holding out his left hand to Hiccup. Reaching out, Hiccup grabbed it with his right hand, allowing Loki to pull him closer, grasping Hiccup's shoulder with his other hand. Suddenly, a burning sensation came from Hiccup's arm, almost as painful as the one from his leg. Looking down, he saw flames licking the air around Loki's hands.

"What are you doing!?" Hiccup demanded before crying out in pain from the flames, the winds and fog swirling around them like a hurricane.

"I'm sorry, Hiccup Dragonrider!" Loki shouted as everything began to fade for Hiccup, the spirit's voice sounding further and further away, "But one does not become touched by fire without being burnt!"

Everything faded to black and Hiccup found himself laying down on something soft, the feel of something laying against his shoulder becoming prominent as the burning pain faded. All at once, Hiccup became aware of his surroundings and snapped his eyes open, gasping as he shot into a sitting position in his bed. A surprised shriek immediately caught his attention and he found Merida straddling his waist, the two looking at each other in wide eyed shock for a moment. Hiccup was vaguely aware of Toothless sticking his head over the end of the bed.

"Hi," Hiccup said after a moment which seemed to snap Merida back to reality.

"Hiccup!" Merida shouted happily, wrapping her arms around Hiccup and embracing him while pulling him into a kiss.

"Whoa, gently, Mer," Hiccup quickly said as Merida pulled away for a second, only to be silenced as she kissed him again.

"At's all ye can say after all this?" Merida said as she continued to kiss him, "Gently?"

As Merida fumbled to touch Hiccup as much as she could, she grabbed onto his right shoulder causing the young man to squeak in pain.

"Gently," Hiccup whimpered as Merida froze before releasing him, allowing Hiccup to fall back onto his bed.

"Sorry," Merida apologized as she cringed. Grunting, Hiccup pushed himself up onto his shoulder before lifting the sleeve of his tunic to look at his right arm. The entirety of his arm and hand was covered in bandages. Reaching down, he grabbed the end wrapped around his right hand and began to unravel it.

"Hic, Ah daenae!" Merida said with concern as she watched him undo the bandages.

"It's okay," Hiccup assured you as the linen wrappings piled into his lap, "I need to see this."

After a few more moments, he had the entirety of the bandage off, the sight of Hiccup's skin causing Merida to gasp in surprise. A long brown burn ran from Hiccup's shoulder to the palm of his hand. What surprised them though was the shape the burn took. It resembled two serpentine dragons entwine with each other down the length of his arm. In the palm of Hiccup's hand the two heads met, looking at one another with jaws open, a flame suspended between them.

"Sun above," Merida whispered as she gently took Hiccup's arm to look at the burn, "How did this happen? This isnae natural."

"No one can be touched by fire without being burnt," Hiccup mused.

"Whit?" Merida asked, giving Hiccup a confused look, "Whit dae ye mean?"

"N-Nothing," Hiccup replied, shaking his head, "I'll tell you later."

Reaching up with his burnt hand, he cupped Merida's face, prompting the girl to smile and sigh at him.

"Your hair," Hiccup said, noticing for the first time, "You changed it."

"Aye," Merida replied, touching her hair self-consciously, "Most o' it got burnt off in th' fire. Ruff fixed it up th' best she cud, but Ah know Ah-

"You look good," Hiccup interrupted with a smile, prompting Merida to blush and smile back at him "It looks good on you."

"Thanks," Merida replied as she bit her lip and giggled, "Still, Ah prefer it long, sae daenae expect this tae last too long."

"The way you wear your hair is completely up to you, Mer," Hiccup stated, "I'm pretty sure you'd be beautiful bald."

In response, Merida leaned forward and captured his lips again, holding the kiss for a few moments before pulling away, flushed.

"Ah missed ye," Merida said with a glowing smile.

"How long was I gone?" Hiccup questioned.

"Near a week," Merida answered, causing Hiccup to pale.

"Wow," Hiccup whispered, before smiling at Merida, "Well, it's good to be back."

"We shud tell everyane," Merida said as she hopped off the bed and began putting her boots on.

"Right," Hiccup agreed as he moved to join her before a look of confusion and surprise crossed his face, "Mer?"

"Aye?" Merida asked as she balanced on one foot while pulling her boot on.

"Whyâ€|why can't I feel my left foot?" Hiccup questioned hesitantly. The question seemed to shock Merida, who let go of her booted foot, which hit the ground with a thud.

"Oh Hic," Merida moaned, clasping her hands together in nervousness, "Ahâ€|In all th' excitement Ah completely fergotâ€|"

Grabbing his blanket, Hiccup quickly tossed it off, the sight of what lay beneath causing his breath to catch in his throat. While his right leg was fine, his left leg now ended just below the knee, his shin and foot having been replaced with a stump covered in burns and stitches.

"Whatâ€|" Hiccup struggled to say, his lower lip trembling as he turned so his legs hung off the bed, "Whatâ€|"

"Th' fire burnt it sae badâ€|" Merida tried to explain, trying to fight tears, "If they didnae take itâ€|itâ€|it was sae badâ€|if theyâ€|oh, Ah'm sae sorry Hiccup!"

Merida ran over, still only wearing on boot, and embraced Hiccup, burying her face in his shoulder as she held him close. Still in shock, Hiccup wrapped his arm around Merida and gripped her tightly, leaning his head against her shoulder, trying not to hyperventilate as he felt her sob.

Looking over, Hiccup saw Toothless wander over and lay his head on the bed next to the young man. Hiccup reached out and patted Toothless on the head, smiling weakly at the Night Fury.

"Hey, bud," Hiccup greeted quietly, "I'm guessing I have you to thank for saving us. Too bad you couldn't save all of me. Guess we're even now."

Toothless whined sadly at Hiccup, who bit his lip as tears began to well up in his eyes. He took a breath, trying to fight the urge to cry, but his breath caught in his throat and a few tears rolled down his cheeks.

"It's okay, Hic," Merida whispered, gripping him tighter, "It's okay tae cry."

Hiccup did just that, breaking down and burying his head into the crook of Merida's neck as tears streaming from his eyes and soaking her shoulder. They stayed like that for a few moments, Merida gripping Hiccup tightly as he sobbed against her while Toothless looked on sadly. After a few minutes, Hiccup pulled away, his breath calming as he wiped the remaining tears from his eyes.

"Are ye okay?" Merida asked with concern.

"No," Hiccup replied, sighing and shaking his head, "But I'm getting closer."

"Alright," Merida replied with a nod as she stepped away.

Hiccup looked down at his legs before burying his face in his hands and groaned.

"How am I supposed toâ€¦!" Hiccup began to ask before his voice trailed off into another groan.

"Here," Merida said as she walked into the corner of the room and retrieved something before returning and giving it to Hiccup, "Gobber made this fer ye."

Hiccup took the prosthetic leg and laid it in his lap, looking down at it. After a few moments he nodded his head and moved to put it on.

"Here, let me help ye," Merida said as she stepped forward and took the prosthetic, helping him to slide it over his stump. Securing it with the straps, Hiccup bent his knee experimentally, testing the wait of the mechanical foot.

"Alright," Hiccup said with a nod, "Here goes nothing."

Pushing himself off the bed, Hiccup stood up, wobbling for a moment as he tried to find his balance. After a moment, he stood a little wobbly before trying to take his first step. Almost immediately, his left leg buckled underneath him and he stumbled. Merida let out a scared yelp, but before she could grab him, Toothless had moved to his side, catching Hiccup and helping the young man back to his feet.

"Thanks bud," Hiccup said, patting Toothless on his head. Walking over, Merida offered Hiccup her arm, which he gladly took. With both Toothless' and Merida's help, Hiccup managed to half walk, half stumble to the door. Merida opened the door and the trio stepped out, allowing Hiccup to get a look at the village, the sight of which nearly knocked him over again. All over the village were dragons, flying in every direction, perched on rooftops or just walking through the streets. Hiccup saw the villagers as well as the visiting Highlanders interacting with dragons peacefully, and he couldn't fight the smile that came to his face.

"Ye did it, Hic," Merida said, pecking him on the cheek, "Ye changed everythin' fer th' better."

"I couldn't have done it without you two," Hiccup replied to the girl and the dragon.

"It wasnae just us," Merida stated.

"You're right," Hiccup agreed with a grin and a nod, "Speaking of which, where is-"

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs shouted as he came running up the street, the other teens, both Vikings and Highlanders, following behind with their dragons, "Hiccup you're alright!"

Before Hiccup could react, Fishlegs barreled into him, wrapping his arms around his best friend and picking him up into the air, much to the amusement of the others.

"I'm so glad you're alright!" Fishlegs declared happily.

"Me too, pal," Hiccup replied awkwardly, "You know, it's great to see you and all, Fish, but can you put me down now?"

"Oh yeah, sure," Fishlegs replied with an awkward chuckle as he set Hiccup down, making sure he stayed steady on his wobbling feet.

"How's theâ€|how's the leg?" Fishlegs asked awkwardly.

"It'sâ€|it's alright," Hiccup replied with a sigh, "I just found out about itâ€|it's going to take some getting used to."

"You can do it," Tuff said encouragingly, Ruff nodding in agreement.

"Yeah cuz," Snotlout agreed, "If you can train a Night Fury, learning to walk with a metal foot should be a easy."

"Thanks guys," Hiccup said with a smile.

"We're just glad you're okay," Astrid stated.

"Aye," Will concurred, "It's good tae hae ye back, laddie. Was getting borin' withoot ye around."

Andra muttered something with a large smile on his face. Everyone looked at him for a moment before turning their attentions to Will for a translation. Will looked like a frightened deer for a moment before chuckling.

"Andra said he's happy ye're feelin' better," Will said, ignoring the glare Andra was giving him, clearly indicating that was not, in fact, what the young man had said. Andra began to say something but was interrupted as Will elbowed him in the stomach, causing the young lord to cough in pain.

As the others watched the scene before them in bemusement, Boyd stepped forward, looking Hiccup over with his usual vacant gaze. After a few moments, Hiccup began to feel uncomfortable.

"Can I help you with something, Boyd?" Hiccup questioned.

"Ah told ye 'at ye cud manage," Boyd said simply.

"What?" Hiccup asked in confusion.

"Th' leg," Boyd elaborated, "Ah told ye 'at ye cud manage withoot ane back in th' arena. Remember? When we fought?"

Hiccup did remember, but that day when Merida and the other Highlanders first came to Berk seemed like a lifetime ago. It was hard to even recognize the person he had been those months past.

"Boyd!" Merida snapped, glaring at her friend. Her glare quickly faltered when Hiccup began chuckling.

"I do remember that," Hiccup snickered, "Looks like you were right after all, Boyd!"

Hiccup began to laugh, Boyd quickly joining in with a goofy smile on his face. The other teens looked on in confusion as Hiccup and Boyd continued to laugh, Hiccup resting his hand on Boyd's shoulder as the young lord began to tear up from laughter.

"What's happening?" Ruff questioned as she leaned over to Will.

"Haenae th' foggiest," Will replied, equally dumbfounded.

Eventually, Hiccup and Boyd's laughter calmed, Boyd wiping a mirthful tear from his eye.

"Thanks, Boyd," Hiccup said with a giggle, patting the young lord on the shoulder, "I needed that."

"Ah daenae really know whot just happened," Merida said, smiling as she shook her head in disbelief, "But it's damn good tae hear ye laugh, Hic."

Hiccup looked like he was about to say something, but stopped when he saw his father coming up the hill. Hiccup smiled as he watched his father rush towards him and kneel down to embrace him.

"Hiccup, thank the gods you're alright, son," Stoick said as he pulled away, beaming at Hiccup. Looking behind his father, Hiccup saw Fergus and Elinor hovering nearby.

"It's good tae see ye on yer feet, lad," Fergus said with a grin.

"Ye gave us quite th' scare, young man," Elinor stated, trying to look stern but failing as a smile broke through, "We're so happy ye're alright."

"Thanks," Hiccup replied before looking around, a questioning look on his face, "Hey, where are-"

"Hiccup!" three simultaneous shouts interrupted Hiccup as the triplets slammed into him, almost knocking the already wobbly young man to the ground. Barely finding his balance, Hiccup held the three boys in his arms before putting them down on the ground.

"We were sae worried about ye!" one declared.

"We thought ye were ne'er gaein' tae wake up!" a second shouted.

"Ne'er!" the third added.

"Did ye really kill Mor'du?" the first questioned.

"Da was sae jealous when he told us," the second said with a smile.

"Ah was nae!" Fergus declared huffily.

"Were too," the triplets replied, giggling.

"Hey, ye hae a foot made o' metal now," the first pointed out.

"Did ye make it?" the third asked.

"Nae," Gobber spoke up as he wandered up, Maudie following behind him, "Ah made 'at, thank ye very much."

"Hey, Gobber," Hiccup greeted with a smile.

"How are ye, lad?" Gobber greeted before his tone turned somber, "Ahâ€|Ah hope th' leg's alright. Had tae make it on short notice an' all."

"It works great, thanks," Hiccup replied, a little more subdued than he had been before.

"Ye know, it's hard at first but ye'll get through it," Gobber stated, "Ye're a strong lad."

"Strong as they come," Stoick agreed, before his face fell, "I'm so sorry, Hiccup. About everything. This was all my fault. If I had just listened to you, none of this would have happened."

Stoick paused, sighing as he looked Hiccup in the eye.

"I'll never forgive myself for what I said to you back in the Great Hall," Stoick stated sadly.

"It's okay, Dad," Hiccup assured his father, "I forgive you for the both of us."

Stoick smiled as he clasped his hands on Hiccup's shoulders.

"You will always be my son," Stoick stated, his voice full of emotion, "And I am so proud of you."

His eyes growing watery, Hiccup stepped forward and embraced Stoick again, the gathered group smiling at the display.

"Gods," Stoick said as he pulled away, "What are we all doing standing around here?"

Grasping Hiccup, he hoisted the young man up onto his shoulders as he turned to address the crowd that had gathered.

"The Demon Bear is dead!" Stoick declared, "The Red Death is dead, and my son is alive! We have been grieving and fretting for a week and I say no more! Today, we revel in our victory! Today, we rejoice in our new found alliances with Highlander and dragon alike! Today, we celebrate!"

The crowd roared in approval as Stoick began making his way into the village, the gathered crowd following, slowly growing as more villagers joined in. Hiccup looked around, a beaming smile on his face as he let out a whoop of joy.

Later,

Night had fallen across the village of Berk, but the darkness did not dampen the celebratory mood of the villagers and their guests. The Great Hall was packed with Vikings, Highlanders and dragons, all drinking and eating with one another, sharing stories and laughing uproariously, one Highlander playing a fiddle somewhere in the crowd. Some dragons had already bonded with Vikings and Highlanders, who were treating the creatures like favored pets. In one corner an intoxicated Viking woman lay against an equally intoxicated Gronckle, the burnt remains of a table standing testament to what happened when one got a dragon drunk.

In a more secluded corner of the Great Hall, Hiccup, Merida and their dragons sat with Gothi, Helga and the large Viking known only as Bucket.

"And that's everything he said to you?" Gothi questioned gravely.

"Every word," Hiccup replied with a nod, "What does it mean?"

"Grave tidings, I am afraid," Gothi stated, "I will need to look into this matter, both on this rising shadow and this godling stranded in the material world."

"Perhaps Hilde knows saemethin'," Merida said hopefully.

"But she's dead," Helga pointed out in confusion.

"Aye, but Ah'm sure she must hae written things down over th' years," Merida explained before turning her attention to the crow sitting on her shoulder, "Right?"

The crow cawed and nodded affirmatively, prompting Merida to smile and pet him on the head.

"Hilde was very auld an' very wise," Merida stated as she turned back towards the others, "Ah'm sure she knew saemethin' 'at cud help us."

"It is agreed then," Gothi said with a nod, "We will all look further into this issue and relate what we find."

"I'm not very good at reading," Bucket complained, earning a chuckle from the others.

"Don't worry, Bucket," Helga said kindly as she patted the large man on his arm, "We'll find some other way for you to help."

"Should we tell our parents?" Hiccup asked.

"We will," Gothi stated with a nod, "But not tonight. Tonight is a night for celebration."

Hiccup smiled and nodded in agreement.

"Now," Gothi said, holding her hand out to the young man, "Let me see that arm of yours."

Hiccup gave Gothi his right arm, the elder rolling up his sleeve to

get a better look at the intricate burn mark. She muttered to herself for a few moments, going over every inch of the burn before nodding her head and looking back to Hiccup.

"It is a blessing," Hilde declared.

"A blessin'?" Merida questioned, "Whit kind o' blessin'?"

"I'm not sure," Gothi replied with a shrug, "I have only seen a few blessings in my time. Never one from the God of Fire."

"He said he wasn't a god," Hiccup replied, "Just a spirit."

"Words are air, Hiccup," Gothi stated knowingly, "They have whatever meaning you choose to give them."

"You sound like you've heard this all before, Elder," Helga pointed out.

"Those who spend their time studying the way of the gods understand these things," Gothi explained, "Years ago, I once had a long conversation with a handsome, young priest of Soliel were we concluded that his god and our Odin were likely one and the same."

"Ma friend, Rapunzel, used tae be blessed by Lord Soliel," Merida stated, "She had th' power tae heal people."

Gothi chuckled at that.

"Whit?" Merida asked in confusion.

"Your friend still has that blessing," Gothi explained, "The blessing of a god never truly leaves a person."

Merida continued to look at Gothi in confusion as the old woman chuckled some more.

"So, it probably has something to do with fire," Hiccup commented as he looked at the mark, "That should be helpful."

"As long as you can control it," Gothi agreed before sighing, "I grow weary of such grim talk. Let us return to the celebration, shall we?"

The others agreed with smiles and nods as they stood up. Tuning to Bucket, Helga held her arms out to him, prompting the large man to bend down and scoop her up, placing her upon his shoulders.

Rejoining the party, Merida and Hiccup walked hand in hand, the Highlander princess slowing her pace so the limping Hiccup could keep up while Toothless and Boudica went scampering off into the crowd. As they walked, Astrid called out to Merida from across the room, beckoning the redhead to join her. Merida hesitated, looking at Hiccup with worry.

"Go on," Hiccup replied with a smile and a shrug, "I'll be fine."

Merida smiled at him and quickly kissed him before turning and walking through the party towards Astrid. Hiccup sighed and smiled as he watched the young woman before almost being knocked to the ground as a large hand slammed against his back.

"Oops, sorry lad," Fergus apologized as Hiccup managed to catch himself, "Fergot ye were still findin' yer legs."

"Yeah," Hiccup replied, fixing his vest as he looked up at Fergus, "Was it this hard for you?"

"Aye, it was tough," Fergus answered as he took a drink from the tankard of ale he was carrying, "But ye'll get through it. Soon enough, ye'll be daein' all th' things ye used tae dae an' ye wonae even notice it."

"Will the feeling ever go away?" Hiccup questioned, looking a little downcast.

"Whit feeling is 'at?" Fergus asked, crooking an eyebrow at the young man.

"The feeling that part of you is gone?" Hiccup elaborated morosely.

"Nae," Fergus replied with a grimace and a shake of his head, "'At ne'er gaes away."

Hiccup sighs and looked down at the floor. The feeling of Fergus placing his hand on Hiccup's shoulder brought the young man's attention back up to the Highlander king.

"But ye dae learn tae live with it," Fergus assured him, a smile spreading across his face, "Now, stop bein' sae sullen. Cheer up! Hae a bloody drink!"

Fergus let out a bellowing laugh, prompting Hiccup to let out a small laugh of his own as the Bear King patted him on the shoulder again and wandered away. Turning, Hiccup's smile grew as he saw Gobber approaching him through the crowd, wearing his tankard prosthetic while holding another tankard in his good hand.

"Hiccup!" Gobber greeted happily, "Ye look like ye need a drink!"

"No thanks Gobber, I-" Hiccup began to say but was interrupted as the blacksmith shoved the tankard into Hiccup's belly, forcing the young man to take it as some ale spilled on the ground.

"Nonsense!" Gobber declared as he led Hiccup over to one of the long tables, "Come, sit an' talk with me awhile."

Sitting down, Gobber took a moment to take a swig of ale, prompting Hiccup to do the same, the young man letting out a cough as the strong liquid flowed down his throat.

"A little strong fer ye, lad?" Gobber questioned with a snort.

"Just a little," Hiccup replied with another cough as he set the tankard down on the table, "So, I hear you're a Macintosh clansman

now."

"Always was, as it were," Gobber answered with a smile.

"That's pretty great, Gobber," Hiccup commented as he took another sip of his drink, "You ever think of going back?"

"Ah hae in fact," Gobber answered, "Ah'm leavin' taemorrow."

Hiccup choked and spit out his drink before turning to look at Gobber in shock.

"Tomorrow!?" Hiccup questioned in surprise.

"Aye," Gobber affirmed, "Th' Highlanders will be shippin' oot taemorrow an' Ah'm gaein' with them. Th' queen will be makin' th' announcement taenight."

Hiccup looked completely lost at the news.

"Oh, daenae give me 'at look," Gobber grumbled, "Ah'm comin' back. Ah'm just gaein' fer th' winter is all."

Hiccup sighed in relief, smiling at Gobber before a thought came to him.

"Who's going to watch the shop while you're gone?" Hiccup asked.

"Well, generally 'at's a task 'at falls tae th' apprentice," Gobber elaborated, eyeing Hiccup knowingly, "With winter comin' an' nae more dragons tae fight, ye wonae hae 'at much work tae dae but it's still a lot o' responsibility. Ye feel up fer it, lad?"

"I'd be honored, Gobber," Hiccup answered with a smile.

"'At's good tae hear," Gobber said proudly before a thought occurred to him, "Ye know, Ah'll probably hae tae find a new apprentice now."

"Why's that?" Hiccup asked, feeling a little hurt by the comment.

"Because now 'at ye're th' big hero, ye'll probably be followin' in yer father's footsteps instead o' mine," Gobber explained, "Ah'm gaein' tae need tae find saemeane tae pass th' shop ontae after Ah'm gone."

"Well, whoever you find, I'll help train them too," Hiccup stated with a nod.

"With th' two o' us teachin' him, we'll make th' best smith th' North has ever seen," Gobber declared happily as he took another drink of his ale.

Suddenly, the sound of a cup banging loudly against a wooden table sounded through the Hall, drawing everyone's attention to the raised dais where the families of the chief and the visiting royals sat. As the crowd quieted, Stoick stopped banging his cup.

"Thank ye, Stoick," Elinor said as she stood up, nodding her head to the village chief, before turning her attention to the gathered people, "People o' Berk an' ma fellow Highlanders, Ah hope ye are all enjoyin' taenight's revelry!"

The crowd roared in response, earning a smile from the queen.

"'At is good tae hear," Elinor stated with a nod, "It fills ma heart with happiness tae see bonds o' friendship an' brotherhood form between our peoples where there was ance only animosity an' bloodshed. But alas, ma people's time on this island must come tae a close."

The crowd groaned in disapproval like disappointed children.

"Ah know, Ah know," Elinor stated with an apologetic tone, "Wud 'at we cud stay. But winter fast approaches an' home beckons. We will leave tomorrow, with th' wind at our backs an' happiness in our hearts. But we shall return, fer it has been decided 'at yer Hiccup will marry our daughter Merida come th' spring!"

Reaching down, she picked up the cup she had been drinking from and raised it above her head.

"A toast tae our brave warriors, both livin' an' fallen!" Elinor declared, prompting the others to raise their tankards before drinking as well.

"An' another toast," a Highlander declared, standing up, "Tae th' hero o' th' battle! Tae Hiccup Bearslayer!"

"No!" a Viking shouted him down, "To Hiccup the Useful!"

"Nae!" another Highlander bellowed, "Tae Hiccup Nightflyer!"

"Nae!" Merida shouted from the other side of the room, stepping up onto a table and holding a tankard of ale above her head looking Hiccup right in the eye, "Tae mm beloved, Hiccup Dragonrider!"

"To Hiccup Dragonrider!" the hall roared agreement as Gobber patted Hiccup on the back before standing up.

"Now lads, let's nae give Hiccup all th' credit," Gobber declared, "He had plenty o' help. Especially from ane person in particular. Tae Princess Merida!"

"No!" Fishguts shouted from his seat, holding a laughing Ribbon in his lap, "She's no princess anymore! She's one of us! To Merida Deathsbane!"

"No!" Bertha yelled from near Merida, "To Merida the Red!"

"No!" Hiccup declared, standing shakily on his two feet, "To the lady of my heart and the girl of my dreams, Merida the Brave!"

"To Merida the Brave!" the crowd agreed as they all took swigs of their drinks.

"When did ye become such a charmer?" Gobber questioned as Hiccup sat back down next to him, watching as Merida smiled at him through

half-lidded eyes.

"It becomes pretty easy when you know they love you back," Hiccup replied with a shrug.

"A song!" one of the Vikings drunkenly declared from somewhere in the room, "This feast needs a song!"

"Indeed," Stoick agreed as he stood up, smiling at the people in the hall, "I must confess, I don't know many songs to fit the occasion. Who will lead us in a song?"

The room fell silent, every person looking at their neighbor, all except Merida, who continued to look at Hiccup from across the room.

"Anyone?" Stoick questioned, scanning the room, "Who will give us a song?"

"_Though Ah may speak saeme tongue o' auld,_" Merida sung, her voice echoing through the hall, "_Or even spit oot saeme holy word_."

"_Ah hae nae strength with which tae speak,_" Merida continued as she stepped off the table and began to walk towards Hiccup, the crowd parting to allow her to pass, "_When ye sit me doon an' see Ah'm weak._"

The fiddler picked up from somewhere in the crowd, his instrument belting out a jaunty tune that prompted Merida to do a few steps and twirls as she approached Hiccup, her skirt spinning around her as she danced.

"_We will run an' scream!_" Merida sang as she reached down and grabbed Hiccup's hands before pulling him to his feet, "_Ye will dance with me! We'll fulfill our dreams an' we'll be free!_"

With that, Merida led Hiccup in a simple dance, the two circling one another with their eyes locked and their shoulders touching, and changing direction every few seconds.

Fergus watched the scene with a smile on his face for a few seconds before turning his attention towards his wife and holding out his hand. Elinor smiled at her husband, taking his hand, allowing him to lead her to the center of the hall and join their daughter in the dance.

As the two couples danced, Maudie walked over and sat down next to Gobber, who was watching the display with a smile on his face.

"Oh, 'at's adorable," Maudie commented with a grin of her own.

"Aye," Gobber agreed before looking at Maudie slyly, "Ye know, despite th' leg, Ah'm quite th' dancer."

"Are ye now?" Maudie questioned, quirking an eyebrow at Gobber.

"Aye, here," Gobber said, quickly standing up and taking Maudie's hand, "Let me show ye!"

Maudie let out a shriek of surprise which quickly became laughter as Gobber pulled her out onto the dance floor with the others. Seeing this, Will smirked before walking over to where Ruff was sitting with her brother.

"May Ah hae this dance?" Will asked, offering Ruff his hand with a charming smile.

"Oh, you can have whatever you'd like," Ruff replied as she took his hand, earning a groan from her brother as Will led her to where the others were dancing.

Seeing the other's dancing, Astrid smiled before turning to where Fishlegs was standing near her and grabbing his arm.

"Come on, Fishlegs!" Astrid said as she dragged him out to the floor, the young man stumbling in surprise, "Come dance with me!"

As the four other couples began to circle around them, Merida and Hiccup continued to circle one another, their eyes locked.

"_We will run an' scream!_" Merida continued to sing, the Highlanders in the crowd joining in on the song, "_Ye will dance with me! We'll fulfill our dreams an' we'll be free!_"

"_We will be who we are an' now heal our scars!_" Merida continued as she reached out and took Hiccup's hands in her leading him threw a few simple steps that the other four couples began to copy, "_An' this will be far away!_"

The music picked up as the Merida began a few stomping steps, the other's following their suit, filling the hall with their sound of their feet slamming against the floor of the Great Hall. The music slowed again and the dancers began circling each other once more.

"_Sae Ah had done wrong tae prove me right,_" Merida continued to sing, looking lovingly at Hiccup, "_My judgment burned in th' black o' night_."

"_When Ah gave less than Ah take,_" Merida sang, holding her hand up between them, Hiccup copying and entwining their fingers, "_It is ma fault ma own mistake!_"

"_We will run an' scream!_" the hall sang together, "_Ye will dance with me! We'll fulfill our dreams an' we'll be free!_"

"_We will be who we are an' now heal our scars!_" Merida sung as she leaned forward, touching her forehead to Hiccup's, "_An' this will be far away!_"

As the song continued, the other couples began the stomping dance again as the music picked once more. Merida and Hiccup however continued to circle each other. Leaning forward they captured each other's lips, closing their eyes as they did. As the music slowed, Hiccup and Merida turned and embraced each other deepening their kiss. Slowly, everything seemed to fade away, leaving the two teens experiencing nothing but one another.

_Years later, _

"Is that it?" the young boy questioned, the ship creaking around him as he looked up at his grandfather.

"'At's it fer this story, aye," the grandfather replied with a shrug.

"Butâ€|But there's so much more left!" the boy exclaimed, his icy blue eyes wide as he stood up, the rocking of the ship failing to bother him, "They have to get married! Andâ€|And what about what Loki said!? About the shadow!?"

"All stories fer another time," the grandfather said as he stood up, "All stories must come tae an end, lad. Besides, Ah believe we shud be reachin' our destination soon."

"Really?" the boy asked in surprise, "We're there already?"

"Time flies, huh?" the grandfather questioned with a smile, "Come on, let's gae above deck. It will be a sight tae see."

The boy nodded with a smile before laughing as his grandfather reached down and scooped him before placing him on his shoulders, the boy having to duck to avoid the low ceiling of the ship. Together, the boy and his grandfather made their way up the stairs onto the top deck. The sails of the longship fluttered in the breeze as the oars cut through the waves of the sea. All around them, sailors were running about the deck, performing their decks. Before the longship, an island rose out the waters and thrust towards the sky, the peaks of its large central mountain towering over the ship.

"There it is!" the boy declared excitedly as he pointed at the island.

"Aye, ye excited?" his grandfather questioned.

"Yeah, Mom and Dad have told me so much about it," the boy replied, looking at the island in wonder.

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock th' Fourth!" a stern voice declared, prompting the boy to look in the direction the voice had come in. Marching across the deck was an older woman with long gray hair and wrinkled features. She wore a long, purple dress and regarded the boy with fierce brown eyes.

"Hi, Granma," the boy, Hiccup, greeted the woman as his grandfather set him down.

"Dae nae 'hi' me, young man," his grandmother said, planting her hands on her hips as she looked down at her grandson, "Ah hae been lookin' all over fer ye. Where hae ye been, Hic?"

"Relax, Elinor," the grandfather replied with a chuckle, "He was with me this whole time."

"Granda was telling me a story to keep me from getting seasick," Hic explained.

"Oh, were ye now, Fergus?" Elinor questioned, raising an eyebrow at

her husband before turning her attention back to Hiccup, "What did I tell you about listening to your grandfather's stories."

"That Granda's a braggart prone to exaggeration," Hicc replied automatically with a sigh.

"Oi!" Fergus exclaimed with annoyance as he shot his wife an angry look, "Whit hae ye been tellin' th' boy?"

"Only th' truth," Elinor replied with a smirk before turning her attention to Hic, "Come along now, Hic, ye're mother's been wonderin' where ye've been fer th' last few hours."

Turning, Elinor led them to the front of the ship. There they found an older Merida who had grown taller and filled out. Her long, curly red hair was held back in a loose pony tail by a green ribbon. She wore a brown fur vest over a light blue tunic and a kilt. Armored leather gloves covered her hands and knee high leather boots protected her feet. Her bow was slung around her shoulders and a crow perched on the railing next to her.

Scurrying around Merida's feet were three little girls, each of them almost indistinguishable from one another. Each of them had mops of curly hair similar to Merida's but theirs was auburn in color along with mischievous green eyes. They were dressed in identical tunics and pants, except that they were individually colored red, blue and green. A trio of Terrible Terrors scampered around with them, each in a color that matched one of the girls' tunics.

As they played around Merida's legs, one of the girls tripped and almost went tumbling over the side of the railing. Merida quickly reached out and grabbed the girl before pulling her back in and planting her on the deck next to her sisters, giving the triplets a stern look.

"Maggie, Maise, Moira!" Merida snapped, "Whit did Ah tell ye lot about horsing around up here? Ye've got tae be more careful. If ane o' ye goes tumblin' intae th' sea, Ah ain't fishin' ye back oot."

"Sorry, Mommy," the girls apologized, earning a small smile from Merida. Turning she saw her parents approaching with Hic.

"There ye are, Hic," Merida stated with a larger smile, "Ah was wonderin' where ye'd run off too. How's yer belly treatin' ye?"

"Better Mom, thanks," Hic replied before glancing around, "Where's Dad?"

"He's scoutin' ahead with Toothless, ye know how he is," Merida replied with a chuckle.

"Look, Hic, look!" one of the girls said pointing up at the island, "Look, it's Berk!"

"Yeah, I saw," Hic stated with a chuckle.

"Do you think you'll find a dragon to ride here?" another girl asked.

"That's what Dad said," Hic answered, "He says Berk has the best dragons in the whole world."

"Speakin' o' yer father," Merida said as she looked up, prompting the others to follow her gaze. As the group looked up at the sun, a shadow went streaking across it before shooting down towards the longship. Quickly righting himself, Toothless flapped his wings to slow his descent before landing.

An older Hiccup slid off Toothless' back, removing the spiked mask and helmet he had been wearing. His hair had grown shaggier and he wore a few braids in it. A short beard covered his smiling face. He was taller and more muscular, dressed in dark brown leather armor.

"Daddy!" the girls declared as they rush towards him, hugging his legs.

"Whoa girls!" Hiccup said with a laugh turning his attention to the others, "You'd think I'd been gone for months!"

"Well, ye know how they are," Merida said as she wandered over and gave Hiccup a kiss, causing the girls to make disgusted noises. Smiling, Hiccup spotted his son and made his way over to him.

"How's it going, pal?" Hiccup questioned, kneeling down and placing a hand on his son's shoulder, "You feeling any better."

"Yeah, lots," Hic answered.

"I'm getting the feeling boats aren't your thing," Hiccup surmised, "How about we try a little flying?"

"Really!?" Hic asked excitedly.

"You bet," Hiccup answered as he stood up, "After all, one of the reasons we came is to find you a dragon to ride. What do you say?"

"Yeah!" Hic exclaimed as he rushed over to Toothless and began trying to pull himself onto the Night Fury's back, the dragon chuckling as he watched the boy struggle. Walking over, Hiccup picked his son up before planting him in the saddle before swinging on behind him.

"Here," Hiccup said as he placed his helmet on his son's head, "Wear this for protection and hold on tight."

"Be careful!" Merida said.

"You know me!" Hiccup replied with a chuckle.

"Aye, exactly," Merida stated with a smile of her own.

Hiccup laughed before urging Toothless up, Hic letting out a whoop of joy as the Night Fury shot into the sky. As they approached the island, Hic could make out the village that had come to dominate a large part of the island. But what caught his eye most was the hundreds of dragons that filled the air, flying in every direction

around the island.

"Let me tell you a few things about Berk, son," Hiccup said as they flew over the island, villagers turning to point as a few dragons began to follow them, "It snows nine months of the year and hails the other three. Any food that grows here is tough and tasteless. The people who grow here are even more so. The upside are the pets. While other places have ponies and parrots, we haveâ€¦"

Hiccup paused as they flew over the main part of the island, prompting dozens of dragons to come flying out of the woods below them. As Hic looked around him, a look of excitement and wonder on his face as he observed the creatures that filled the air, one thought was on his mind and he let it out in a whisper.

"Dragons."

A/N: The end! That's a wrap folks. End of the line. You don't have to go home but you can't stay here. All kidding aside, I wanted to thank each and every one of you for sticking with me for the last eighteen months or so since I started in the story. When I first started writing this story it was on the heels of having just finished Heaven's Light which had earned the spot of my most successful story, being the first time I broke two hundred reviews. Never in my wildest dreams did I believe this story would blow it out of the water so completely, sitting ready to break thirteen hundred reviews. Once again, I have to say thank you to all of you, you are the best fans I could have hoped for and I appreciate you all having taken the time to visit my little corner of the internet and read my little story.

One of the big questions on everyone's mind, bolstered by the fact this story is ending not long after the second How to Train Your Dragon movie has come out, is whether I am doing a sequel. The answer is a definite yes. In fact I have a whole series planned out which those of you that have taken a peek at my profile know I am calling A Song of Sun and Shadow, though that's subject to change if I or someone else can come up with a better name. Currently, I plan on finishing the small inbetween story I've been writing on the side, Seven Days in Corona, first before I continue on with the story. From there, there will be about three short stories before I give you two bigger ones comparable to this one along with another smaller story before wrapping everything up in a final big story. I hope you guys like what I have planned for the future, and I will tell you right now, in addition to the cast of characters I have now, I will be bringing three other movies into my little universe. Good luck guessing which ones! In addition, I am going to report that the next story in the series will be called "When the Cold Winds are a Callin'", hope you enjoy. Also, for sticking with me this long, I've decided to add a little stinger of sorts after these notes, hope you like it! That's about it from me folks, so once again, thank you for reading my story and for one last time I'd like to remind you all that feedback and critiques are always welcome, so please review! Later!

_ The Nest _

Thick blankets of fog covered the desolate island known only as the Nest. Soon that name would be forgotten as all the dragons had fled

the island, traveling to Berk with the Vikings and Highlanders. Nothing was left on this barren speck of land.

Nothing but the corpses and the Vendal.

The Vendal had suffered a heavy loss from the battle and the disastrous destruction of the mountain that had followed. Less than half of the savages remained, picking their way across the island, lost and forlorn. Many gathered around the body of their fallen leader, keeping scavengers from the Demon Bear's corpse. Above them, the ruins of the Red Death sat on the new crown of the mountain, hot magma pooling around the dragons, its body quickly withering away so that barely more than a skeleton remained.

One Vendal stood at the edge of the group, searching among the rocks for crabs or other things to eat. As he looked, the sound of someone walking across the stony shore caught his attention. Looking into the fog, the Vendal saw nothing for a few moments before a figure began to emerge from the mist. Grunting, the Vendal brought the approaching figure to the attention of the others, who all quickly moved to grab weapons and turn to face the possible threat. Grunting again, one of the Vendal pointed at the figure, causing it to stop and hold up its hands.

"Peace friends, peace," a male, sly voice urged, "I mean you know harm."

The Vendal did not lower their weapons but did not move to attack either.

"I have come to offer my condolences," the man stated, indicating to Mor'du's body, "It is not often one loses a leader and a god in the same day along with your home and half of your people. Truly, these are sad tidings."

The Vendal looked downcast, letting out a few grunts to one another.

"But fear not," the man reassured them, "For I have come to help."

The Vendal grunted in confusion.

"You see, I too have reason to hate those upon Berk," the man explained, "And I plan on making them pay. Them, along with everyone else. I have plans you see, plans that will change the world."

The Vendal continued to grunt in confusion, though many seemed interested in what the man had to say.

"You can be part of these plans if you wish, many others already are," the figure explained as more figures appeared in the fog, dozens and dozens of them, "We all strive for the same cause, and we'd be honored if you'd join our growing family."

Stepping forward, the man emerged from the fog, allowing the Vendal to see him clearly. He was tall and gaunt with hollow features and a long nose. He had black hair and a thin black mustache grew under his nose. He wore a black cloak with the hood pulled up, under which he wore a dark brown leather jerkin and grey pants along with brown

leather boots. Where his left hand should have been instead was a stump that continued on in a long skinny blade. From behind his back, the hilt of a bastard sword stuck out.

"After all," he said charmingly, grinning as he spoke, "Are we not all Outcasts?"

End
file.